

THE 3 INVESTIGATORS in

THE SECRET OF THE YACHT PAINTINGS





in

**THE SECRET
OF THE
YACHT PAINTINGS**

A burglar steals a seemingly worthless old painting from Samuel Reynolds, the retired chief of police of Rocky Beach and an old friend of The Three Investigators. They discover that the stolen item is part of a series of three paintings of different yachts, and suspect that there is a secret hidden in the paintings. To uncover the secret, they must get to all three paintings. Jupiter, Pete and Bob immediately set out to track down the art items but they have to contend with the ruthless and dangerous burglar.

The Three Investigators
in
The Secret of the Yacht Paintings

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by

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1. The Inventory Cards

Jupiter Jones had just locked the trailer when he saw his uncle Titus hurrying towards him. At first glance, he could see that his uncle is not happy with something.

“Wait a minute!” Jupiter told his friends Pete and Bob, who had already grabbed their bikes.

No sooner was Titus Jones within earshot than he burst out: “Jupe! Have you been poking around in my inventory cards? It’s a total mess! You should ask me if you want to know something!”

“I didn’t touch anything!” Jupiter replied truthfully. “Word of honour!”

“Then it had to be Mathilda! I just can’t stand it when my inventory cards are messed up as... as...”

“... Messed up as in The Jones Salvage Yard?” Jupiter finished the sentence with a smile. That was a bit cheeky and he had to duck cleverly to avoid the oil rag that Uncle Titus had thrown at him. Why was there always so much stuff lying around in a salvage yard?

“Maybe it was a burglar,” Jupiter added when he had straightened up again.

Now Uncle Titus had to laugh. “Why must you always have to smell a case for The Three Investigators? I bet the real reason for the mess in my box is that your aunt was out with the duster!”

“Cleaning is her constant passion!” Bob said.

But that was the cue. “Which one of you boys wants to help me clean up?” suddenly the strong voice of Aunt Mathilda came from the yard office window. When it came to work at the salvage yard, she smelled The Three Investigators even when they were a long way off. “Where are you all hiding?”

“Let’s get out of here,” Pete nervously urged to leave. “It’s impolite to be late when visiting Chief Reynolds. Anyway, he’s giving us an ice cream treat!”

The Three Investigators laughed, swung themselves onto their bicycles and shouted goodbye to Titus Jones, who muttered something as he bent down to look for the oil rag.

The three of them quickly cycled out of the main gate. In the next few minutes, they pedalled hard. Only when they had almost gone out of Rocky Beach, Bob turned to Jupiter who was cycling behind him.

“What are those inventory cards your uncle was talking about?” Bob asked.

“He keeps records of certain items he buys and sells,” Jupe replied.

“I never knew your uncle kept such records.”

“That’s partially right,” Jupe replied as he caught up with Bob. “For the kind of items we have in the salvage yard, we don’t usually record whom we buy from and whom we sell to. It’s far too tedious, not to mention, customers would feel uncomfortable if we ask them for details. But sometimes Uncle Titus is offered something whose source is perhaps questionable. If he suspects that it might be stolen goods, he would refuse the deal anyway. But even an experienced trader like him cannot always be sure. That is why for some dubious items, he records down the source or the seller, and the eventual customer, so that it could be traced in case of later enquiries.”

“And that’s in his so-called inventory cards?”

“Yes, he writes them on index cards rather than in a book,” Jupe said. “That is because he finds it easier to sort them according to item type. He keeps the cards in a box.”

“And where is that box?”

“It’s in a little cabinet by the cash register. It’s usually locked, but the hiding place for the key isn’t very secure—it’s behind the front left foot of the cabinet.”

Bob nodded and braked. The Three Investigators were out of Rocky Beach by then. Now they faced the dangerous task of crossing the busy Pacific Coast Highway.

After minutes of waiting, the pedestrian traffic light finally turned green for a few seconds and The Three Investigators were able to roll into the small cul-de-sac leading to an airy residential area. There Chief Reynolds had bought a nice little apartment after his retirement.

Samuel Reynolds was the former chief of police of Rocky Beach. He had known The Three Investigators since the start of their detective agency. Reynolds was often pleased with their contributions that he had even designated them as ‘Volunteer Junior Assistant Deputies’. Now that he had retired, the three boys still call and refer to him as ‘Chief Reynolds’. Most of all, they had never forgotten that the former chief had always backed them up in their investigations.

Reynolds’s apartment was on the second floor and he must have put all his money into it. From the terrace, one could see the ocean, which, a little way below, was constantly crashing against the rocks. It was a dream-like sight, at least when the fog didn’t just drift over the water and hide everything in its grey nothingness.

The Three Investigators had visited Reynolds there several times. And since he was no longer chasing criminals, he had become calmer, more relaxed, and one could almost speak of a warm-hearted relationship with the detectives.

The Three Investigators covered the last few metres, turned into a footpath in front of a grey van parked at the side of the road, and locked their bikes at a bicycle stand. Bob held the gift for Reynolds that he had got a few days ago.

They walked along a narrow footpath that led through a park-like front garden. As they went around a lush green bush, they saw that they had not come alone. A small man dressed in black was just bending over the intercom panel as if he was looking for something. When he heard the three boys, he turned around, startled. The Three Investigators looked into a deeply tanned face—probably tanned by the weather. Dark eyes looked at them dismissively.

“Do you live here?” the man asked them.

Jupiter was not easily impressed. “Who are you looking for?” he asked back instead of answering.

“I’m looking for Mr Samuel Reynolds, yes!” He spoke with a Spanish accent. “I can’t find his name plate. There are only apartment numbers here.”

“A security measure by the residents,” Jupe said. “Please wait here. We will ask Mr Reynolds if he would like to see you!”

The man hesitated. “Well... okay.”

“May I also know your name?” continued Jupiter.

“Frank Escovedo,” it came after a brief hesitation. “You’re very curious.”

“I would describe it more as ‘careful’, Mr Escovedo. I like to know who I’m dealing with. And furthermore, it’s only decent to ask Mr Reynolds if he’s expecting you.”

The Three Investigators pressed Reynolds’s intercom button.

“Jupiter Jones,” the First Investigator said into the intercom and the door buzzer went off immediately. Bob held the door open and Pete and Jupiter slipped through.

“Please wait here,” Jupiter repeated once again.

The Three Investigators stormed up the stairs. Mr Reynolds was already at the door. A warm smile played around his lips. "Hello, Jupiter, Pete, Bob! So glad you could come."

"Well, it's been quite some time, Chief!" Jupiter waved Pete to the door. "After you, Pete!"

Suddenly they heard footsteps behind them. Surprised, Reynolds looked past Jupiter and Bob. "Who is that there?"

2. A Strange Offer

The strange man took a step forward. "Allow me, Frank Escovedo. I just happened to arrive here together, yes! I don't want to take up much of your time and I just have a quick question." His eyes wandered curiously through Reynolds's hallway as if searching for something.

"Well, come in for a moment," Reynolds growled, "but as you can see, I have visitors and little time. So, what's it about?"

"Ships, Mr Reynolds, ships. I work for a Hollywood director. Very rich. He collects things from old ships—signs, ropes, drawings, books, models... and pictures and paintings, yes. A neighbour who sold me something told me you have a wonderful painting of a yacht... ah, isn't that the one, yes?" He pointed to a large painting that hung next to the cloakroom.

"Which neighbour would that be?" Reynolds asked suspiciously and did not move.

"Oh, I'm not naming any names. Discretion, you understand, yes? If you help me with a tip, I won't name you either, Mr Reynolds."

Without being invited, the man walked past Reynolds and approached the painting. It showed a green yacht which lay well in the sea in strong winds. The kitschy background—an island with a sunset in the background—made the picture look a bit too colourful.

The Three Investigators also came curiously closer. They knew the painting—very well, in fact. They had personally given it to Chief Reynolds on his retirement some time ago. Not only because Reynolds liked ships, but also because the yacht bore his first name—"Samuel".

"Well, it's not as artistically valuable as I thought," murmured Mr Escovedo, somewhat disappointed, "although a very nice yacht, yes!"

He turned to Reynolds, who by now had developed alarming lines on his forehead. "I'd still like to buy it, Mr Reynolds. I can offer you a hundred dollars. That's more than painting is worth."

Reynolds shook his head. "No. This painting is not for sale." He winked at The Three Investigators. "It's a gift from very dear friends."

"Too bad. My employer would like that painting. But if you don't want to..." The man turned to the door, but stopped there once more. "My employer would be willing to pay \$200 for that painting, yes."

Reynolds looked up, but said nothing.

"Not enough? How about \$500? You up for it?"

"You mean whether I'd sell it for \$500?" Reynolds repeated incredulously.

"Yes. Money's no problem for a Hollywood movie director, yes!"

"Uh-huh," Reynolds said, hesitating.

Jupiter looked at the former chief of police. \$500 for an artistically rather worthless painting they had given to him? Why shouldn't he sell? \$500 wasn't to be sniffed at. But Jupiter would also be a little offended if their friend agreed to the deal. After all, it was their gift to him. And above all, why was the man so interested in the painting that he raised the price so quickly? Was the story of the Hollywood director true at all? In Jupiter's brain, alarm bells started ringing.

But Reynolds already shook his head and pushed the man roughly through the door. The physical appearance of the old chief was still impressive. “Sorry, sir! You barge in here and bother me with strange requests. Do your business elsewhere! And give my regards to your employer. Tell him to come to me personally if he wants something.”

Reynolds closed the door and turned around. “Strange guy. Did you really think for one second that I was going to sell the painting you gave me?”

“No,” Jupiter lied.

“You can see that it has a place of honour! I was more pleased about your gift than about all the speeches and official gifts from the police. How did you know I liked ships?”

“You told us once,” Bob said. “You said if you hadn’t become a policeman, you would have gone to sea. And when we found this yacht painting in Uncle Titus’s collection, especially one with your name on it, we thought you’d enjoy it!”

Reynolds gave him a nod.

“There were originally three paintings...” Jupe remembered. “All featured yachts—three different yachts. Uncle Titus had got them from a travelling dawdler. The other two paintings should have been sold by now.”

Jupe stepped up to the painting and looked at it as if for the first time. “The painting bears no signature,” he said. “Not a single reference to the painter. Signing his name didn’t seem important to him.”

Jupiter took a step back without taking his eyes off the painting. “I don’t know much about paintings, but I doubt that this is of much artistic value. It seems much too large with the kitschy background, the colourful flower island and the women swimming in the sea!”

Reynolds was smiling. “It doesn’t bother me. But come on out to the terrace. I bought great ice cream!” When Jupiter didn’t react, he added: “Or do you suspect a secret behind the painting, Jupiter Jones?”

Jupiter was still staring at the painting. “I’m just wondering why this particular painting is suddenly getting such an interest.”

“Why shouldn’t a Hollywood director collect things about old ships?” Reynolds asked and shrugged his shoulders. “There are people like that.”

Jupiter nodded and followed Reynolds onto the terrace.

It really was a special ice cream treat with which the old chief surprised his young friends. The ice cream were shaped into three big question marks—one white, one blue and one green—placed nicely on the tray that Reynolds brought out after they sat down.

“Custom-made by Luigi of Ice-Dealer, the Italian ice cream parlour,” Reynolds said, not without pride. “I can guess which one of you will choose which colour!”

The Three Investigators nodded and distributed the question-mark ice cream among themselves—white for Jupiter, blue for Pete, green for Bob—that was how they had assigned the colours to each other as identification marks. Reynolds himself was content with a traditional vanilla ice cream with a dash of Amaretto liqueur.

No sooner had Jupiter eaten his first spoonful of ice cream than he returned to the subject that preoccupied him more than anything else. “Chief, the ice cream is really excellent. I’m just wondering, who was the neighbour that tipped Mr Escovedo off?”

Reynolds laughed. “Always suspicious, huh? Looks like there’s more than one person, Jupiter. I know many neighbours and some of them have been my guests. I can ask around tomorrow if you like.”

“Gladly. And I’m glad to hear you’re settling in so well in your new home.”

“Yes, yes.” Chief Reynolds hesitated a moment. Then he pulled out a small wrapped package and handed it to The Three Investigators.

Bob accepted it and unwrapped the package. It was a small glass bear.

“For your headquarters. I remember that you broke the last one in a fight.” Reynolds smiled.

The Three Investigators beamed with delight.

“We’ve brought you something too,” Jupiter said and handed him the package over the table.

Reynolds removed the wrapping paper and it was a board game—‘Master Thief and Master Detective’.

The chief thanked them and Bob quickly said: “Maybe you can play it with one of your neighbours.”

“This is a nice change in my daily routine,” Reynolds said.

For all the joy Reynolds showed over the gift, Bob felt that he was lonely. The long years of police service had drained him. He lived alone here, surrounded by nice neighbours, but ultimately alone.

For the rest of the evening, the conversation had been lively as Mr Reynolds had asked The Three Investigators to tell him about some of their cases since his retirement. An almost bottomless barrel had been opened, the contents of which distracted even the brooding Jupiter from his thoughts.

Among the adventures they told the old chief were the baffling incidents at the Valley of Eagles; Jupe’s appearance on a quiz show; Pete’s heroics at the ‘Cave of Torture’; Bob’s space shuttle mission; and of course, their unforgettable trip to the ‘Island of Death’ in the Pacific ocean.

Astonished and shaking his head, the chief listened intensely. Proud and constantly interrupting each other, The Three Investigators continued to report. Time flew by and the dark Californian night was already upon them when The Three Investigators finally said goodbye.

When going out, Jupe took a last look at the painting with the yacht, as if he could still see something in it that he had overlooked all along. Then he turned to the former chief. “Maybe you’d better lock your painting away for safety,” he said, shaking Reynolds’s hand.

Samuel Reynolds laughed. “You really are still the same. Everywhere you go, you smell a case. Well... most of the time you were right.” He frowned. “But who would break into an old policeman’s house and steal a simple painting. Well... you’d better go home now. It’s later than we thought.”

“It’s because of the exciting conversation, Mr Reynolds,” replied Jupiter. “But before I go to bed, I must sort something out. I don’t think it will be inevitable that I check Uncle Titus’s inventory card box to see if I’m right about a certain suspicion!”

“One of these days you’re going to break your tongue while composing your sentences,” Reynolds laughed and waved after The Three Investigators.

3. The Third Painting

When The Three Investigators had finally returned to The Jones Salvage Yard, tired from the ride back, and had parked their bikes, Jupiter headed for the yard office without saying another word. As usual, he had not explained his thoughts further. Pete and Bob knew that. Apparently Jupiter was of the opinion that his detective colleagues could easily come up with the possible connection he had in mind.

Jupiter opened the door, switched on the light and went to the old cash register where the customers' money was kept, if it didn't disappear into Titus's pocket earlier. To the left of the cash register was the cabinet in which Titus kept his inventory card box. The First Investigator bent down to pull out the key at the front left foot of the cabinet. As it should have been, it was there. With an expectant smile on his lips, Jupiter inserted the key into the lock and turned it around. Then he opened the small wooden door. The compartment was empty.

"The box has disappeared!" cried Jupiter, startled.

"Stolen?" Bob asked.

"Possibly." Jupiter breathed deeply. "I hope, however, Uncle Titus took it out to rearrange the contents."

The boys went out of the office and looked over to the Jones house, but everything was dark there. Jupe remembered that Aunt Mathilda was away out-of-town to visit a relative and would be back by noon tomorrow. Apparently Uncle Titus had gone to bed early.

"I'm afraid we'll have to wait until tomorrow," Jupiter said disappointedly.

"I'm afraid you'll have to wait until tomorrow," Pete remarked. "Because I have no idea what you are up to, Jupe! Do you, Bob?"

"I have a hunch," Bob said. "It must have something to do with the paintings..."

Jupiter's forehead curled impatiently. "My suspicion is quite simple. The information on the yacht paintings are the reason why the inventory cards got into this mess, as Uncle Titus had complained about earlier... Fellas, I suspect that the paintings hold a secret that we must take care of."

"Perhaps the yachts lead to a hidden treasure," Bob speculated.

"Or are they covering up a dark truth?" murmured Pete.

"Either way," Jupiter said in a firm voice, "The Three Investigators will figure it out!"

The next morning, Jupiter had already eaten two bowls of cornflakes for breakfast when his uncle finally showed up in the kitchen. He placed the day's copy of the *Los Angeles Times* on the table and turned on the CD player almost simultaneously.

A few days ago, to Jupiter's great horror, he had taken a liking to the music of jazz musician Bix Beiderbecke. Uncle Titus turned the sound up with delight. Like every morning when the sun was shining—and that was almost always the case in Rocky Beach—he was in the best of moods.

"Have you put your inventory cards back in the proper order?" Jupiter asked his uncle.

Titus poured himself a cup of coffee. "Thanks for turning on the coffee machine already," he replied.

Jupiter nodded impatiently as his uncle put the jug back in the machine.

"My inventory cards are sorted back in order," he said.

Jupiter breathed again. So the box was not stolen. That wouldn't have fit into his theory either. "Were any cards missing?"

"I didn't check that, Jupe." Titus took a deep plate and shook a mountain of cornflakes into it. "What cards are you referring to?"

"The cards for the yacht paintings. You remember... there were three paintings! You weren't 100% sure it wasn't stolen goods at the time, so I supposed you made a card for each of them. We had given one of the paintings to Chief Reynolds when he retired. "

"Yes, of course I remember that... wait... I think the inventory cards were actually not there!" He put the coffee on the table and hurried out of the kitchen. A short time later, he returned with the box under his arm, sat down at the table with Jupiter and took off the lid.

Now Titus Jones himself had become curious. "I have arranged it by item type," he murmured. "Here are the cards for paintings... Rocky Beach... Sunsets... but where are the yachts? It's true! The cards are gone!" Outraged, he closed the box. Gone was his good mood.

"So, you went through my box after all? Or Mathilda? It really gets on my nerves!" Titus exclaimed.

"Has there been a customer with you lately asking about the paintings with the yachts?" Jupe interrupted him impatiently.

"Not that I know of."

"Have you in the last few days told any suspicious-looking people about the box..."

"Jupe!" Uncle Titus was outraged. "I won't just give away my secrets!" He took a sip of coffee, which calmed him down a bit.

"Besides the one we gave Chief Reynolds, what happened to the other two?"

"I sold one of them years ago. The last one is still in the storeroom. I just saw it a week ago," said Titus, and the hint of a smile flitted across his face. "Come, I'll show you the work of art!"

Titus finished his cup of coffee and they both left the house and crossed over to the salvage yard. They went to the storeroom where Titus kept the weather-sensitive objects. For a while, he had locked the storeroom regularly, but then convenience prevailed and the sliding door was simply closed after each visitor.

"A week ago, I was looking for an old frame and the painting popped up. I put it in the front with the other paintings." He walked up to several paintings that were leaning side by side on a box. "It is a simple but beautiful painting. I priced it at \$120 with a \$20 bargaining chip. But where is it? I was so sure..."

But no matter how hard he searched, the painting of the yacht was not there.

"You mean the painting was stolen?" Bob frowned. The Three Investigators were inside their headquarters, an old mobile home trailer parked in the salvage yard.

"Another possibility would be that Aunt Mathilda sold the painting," replied Jupiter. "She will be back at noon today. Then we can ask her."

"Consequently, we have nothing to do for the time being," Pete rejoiced. "Then let's go to the beach! The paper says the best waves are expected at Malibu Beach. My surfboard's really dried up. I suggest—"

"We will go to Chief Reynolds and take a closer look at the painting of the yacht," Jupiter's wishes were decidedly different from Pete's.

“I suspect one of the painting carries a puzzle... perhaps all three,” Jupe continued. “The missing inventory cards from Uncle Titus’s box are a signal that someone is after the paintings. And it’s safe to assume that we met this person yesterday—Mr Escovedo. I’ll bet he didn’t get his tip on Chief Reynolds from a neighbour, but from Uncle Titus’s inventory cards!”

“But why should the paintings suddenly be so important?” Pete asked. He didn’t want to give up the idea of surfing yet. “After all, they have been around for a few years.”

“Well, to find that out, we’ll have to study the object itself,” Jupe said.

Pete was hoping for Bob to disagree with Jupiter, but it was not to be.

“Chief Reynolds’s painting is the only one we can get at the moment... So let’s start with that!” Bob said. “Perhaps we can find the decisive lead!”

4. An Honourable Assignment

For better or worse, Pete had to bow to the decision of his friends. The Three Investigators got on their bicycles and for the second time in two days, they went to Chief Reynolds's apartment.

When they rolled towards the housing estate, they noticed a police car there. It was parked right in front of the walkway that led to Reynolds's apartment block. Something must have happened.

The Three Investigators hurriedly locked their bikes and ran along the path. As Jupiter bent over the intercom panel, the door to the staircase was opened from the inside. A familiar person stepped out.

"What are you doing here?"

Surprised, The Three Investigators took a step back. "Inspector Cotta!" Jupiter said, perplexed.

Since Reynolds no longer worked at the Rocky Beach Police Department, Cotta had become their valued contact there. However, Jupiter hardly expected to find him here.

"What happened?" asked the First Investigator.

"A burglary," Cotta replied curtly. "You really seem to have a sixth sense for crime!"

"A break-in at Chief Reynolds' apartment?" Jupiter asked.

Cotta nodded.

"The yacht painting has been stolen!" Jupiter exclaimed.

For the first time, Cotta lost his serious expression and a smile flitted across his face. "If you know about everything, why did you come here at all? Maybe you can present the culprit to me, then we can go for a drink together and enjoy the beautiful day."

"The culprit is a Mr Escovedo," Jupiter said. "But I don't think that's his real name."

Cotta breathed out audibly. "That's what Reynolds just told me. You seem to have your fingers in this case! But you can go up. Two of my colleagues will secure the traces, but I can call them back as we now have three great detectives to handle this!" He smiled at the boys. "Have fun!"

The Three Investigators said goodbye to Cotta and promised him that they would inform him of their findings if necessary. They knew that Cotta would not stand in the way of The Three Investigators in their investigations, even less so, because the burglary victim was Chief Reynolds himself.

The former chief had heard the voices of The Three Investigators by now and was waiting for them, dressed in a modern jogging suit, smiling on the top of the stairs.

"It's touching how you all look after me—first Cotta and his burglary experts now The Three Investigators! Then nothing more can happen to me. Come on in!"

Jupiter, Pete and Bob stepped in and took a disappointed look at the spot on the wall where the painting with the yacht had hung. They had come too late. The two policemen examined various objects for fingerprints.

"Put the vase back in its right place," Reynolds yapped at one of them so loudly that he almost dropped it in fright.

The three boys followed Reynolds to the terrace. The sun was warm, the breeze was barely stirring and the sea was roaring beneath them. Reynolds pointed to the chairs and the three of them sat down.

“Excuse me, but it makes me very nervous when two rookies from the police mess up my apartment,” said the chief as he also took his seat. “But I must congratulate you, Jupiter! You were right with your hunch—as if I hadn’t learned to listen to you after all these years.”

Jupiter did not answer, but his face gained some colour.

Reynolds noticed, smiled and went on: “Well, the loss of the painting might have been bearable if it hadn’t been a gift from you. I just want to know why it’s so important that someone risks breaking in to steal it. And I don’t think we’re gonna get anywhere with that question if we go around all the famous Hollywood directors.”

“The painting carries a secret,” Jupiter said. “We just don’t know what it is yet. But now tell us, Chief, how can one steal from a skilled policeman?”

Reynolds took a breath and let his gaze wander into the distance. “My apartment is not too secure against burglary,” he said. “Who would steal from me... I put all my money into this place, otherwise I own almost nothing. The pension I get is enough to live decently, nothing more!” He took a short break. “Would you like something to drink? Cola? Water?”

The Three Investigators shook their heads.

“Aren’t you afraid?” Jupe asked.

“Afraid? You know, I’ve seen so much. I’m not afraid of a burglar. I could have thrown that Escovedo over the terrace rail if I have got him in my hands.”

“But you didn’t get him,” Jupiter threw in a glance at the sports suit Reynolds was wearing. “Because you were jogging at the time in question.”

Reynolds nodded. “You are wide awake, Jupiter—as always.” He smiled. “Would you kindly do me a favour... take the case? I’d like the painting back, please, and the police have more important things to do than to deal with petty burglaries.”

The Three Investigators beamed with emotion and began to stutter. Who would have thought Chief Reynolds would ask them for help!

“With pleasure,” Jupiter was the first to say. “We will do our best for you! I promise you that!” He reached into the inside pocket of his jacket and pulled out a card. “But we should not abandon our ritual. Here, Chief Reynolds, is our card.”

Although he had known the business card by heart for years, Reynolds went into the game and studied the text as if reading it for the first time. It said:



“That really sounds highly professional,” he said. “I feel like I’m in the best hands. So bring the painting back to me!”

The Three Investigators nodded with enthusiasm.

“Then please tell us everything you know about the break-in,” said Jupe.

Reynolds reported how he had set off for the beach to go jogging like he did every morning. When he returned a good hour later, his apartment door had been broken open with a lock pick and the painting had disappeared. Apart from that, nothing else was missing.

"There are four apartments on this floor," the chief concluded. "An older couple who went on holiday, a younger woman who was also absent, and a man who was still in bed at the time of the crime. Of course, I have already questioned him, but he didn't notice anything suspicious. This won't be an easy case for you!"

"Our cases have never been easy," Jupiter replied and he promised: "We will solve the mystery of the paintings and bring back your 'yacht'!"

"And how do you want to do that, Jupiter Jones?" Pete asked as they rode back on their bikes to the salvage yard. "We don't even have a painting to examine!"

Jupiter, who was pedalling heavily a bit behind him and gasping for air, let out a grunt. In the meantime, the heat of the day was fully on them.

"Perhaps we can find out from Aunt Mathilda about the third painting..." Jupe said. "She should be back by now."

When The Three Investigators turned into the salvage yard, Mathilda Jones was already eagerly awaiting her nephew. She had her hands energetically positioned at her hips.

"Jupiter Jones," she barked, as soon as The Three Investigators got off their bikes. "What about the laundry?"

"Oh my goodness," Jupiter said. "I did promise to iron the trousers!"

"Yes, you did," Mathilda said in a stern voice.

"We... the three of us are going to do it together right now! It's a snap. Before that, we just have a few questions for you."

Aunt Mathilda seemed satisfied with that reply.

"All right, but come on in," she said a little softer. "We're having fresh cherry pie. It's a new recipe."

The Three Investigators ran into the yard office. On the table was a big, red cherry pie, tempting and untouched.

"Aunt Mathilda... Do you remember the three paintings with the yachts?" Jupiter asked when they had sat down.

Mathilda sliced the cherry pie and was, as one could conclude from the huge portions that she distributed with relish, almost in a good mood again. "I remember one painting, Jupe. I sold it the day before yesterday."

"The day before yesterday?" Jupiter jumped up. He almost hugged his aunt for the answer. So the painting hadn't been stolen! There was a chance to find it and perhaps unravel the mystery of the paintings.

"Do you know to whom?" he asked insistently. Then he remembered that he himself already suspected it. "Was it an unpleasant, dark-haired man who..."

Aunt Mathilda interrupted him. "It was a woman, Jupe... and it was her first time here."

"Did you write her name down?" Bob asked in between and pulled out his notebook.

Aunt Mathilda shook her head. "No. But we did have a little talk. Actually, she wasn't looking for a painting at all. She was looking for information. She wore some strange medallion on a chain around her neck. It was more like a pendant than a locket. There were letters like 'RB-Cal' engraved at the bottom part and she said it could mean 'Rocky Beach/California'. She wanted to know if I had ever seen her pendant before. Here, I have come across many objects, but I couldn't help her. Then she poked around the yard for a

while. It seemed to me that she didn't quite trust me and wanted to try her luck herself. That's when she discovered the painting in the storeroom."

"Please tell us everything as precisely as possible," Jupiter asked and sat down again. "Every word can be important. Was she excited when she discovered the painting?"

His aunt laughed. "Once again, I suppose you're in the middle of a really dangerous case, aren't you? I think you're letting your imaginations run away with you this time. There was nothing but a yacht in the painting. What sort of mystery would it contain?"

Jupe nodded. Once again he felt that his aunt sometimes lacked imagination.

Aunt Mathilda shook her head in disbelief and continued speaking: "The woman was not looking at the painting as if she were on the trail of a secret. She looked quite enraptured and said something like: 'The white ship is a beautiful dream. Ever since I was a child, I've dreamed that a white ship would come and take me away.' I replied: 'Well, then you're in luck—a dream for a hundred and twenty dollars. There are more expensive wishes.' She laughed and paid. She didn't even haggle over the price!"

"And then she just went away?" Jupiter asked disappointedly. "She did not say where to? What else did she have in mind?"

Aunt Mathilda shook her head.

"What did she look like? How old was she?" asked Bob as his pen flew across the paper.

Mathilda pondered for a moment. "Well, early fifties? As tall as me, but..." Mathilda cleared her throat and winked at Bob, "... quite a bit narrower. She was wearing a colourful, somewhat unfashionable dress and spoke with a Spanish accent."

"Was she driving a car?" Jupe probed further.

"I think not, Jupe. In any case, I didn't see her get into a car. But she could have parked outside. What do you want with that woman?"

"We are primarily concerned with the painting," Jupiter said and pondered. "You said that she was looking for information about her pendant. Perhaps this could help us find the woman again. Where else could she have asked about her pendant?"

Aunt Mathilda hit her hand on her forehead. "Of course! Why didn't I think of it right away! I sent her to the book store! At Booksmith, they have a big section of old books. I'm sure she could find something about a rare medallion there!"

"Thank you!" Jupiter jumped up and gobbled down the rest of his pie. "Off to Booksmith, fellas! Every minute counts!"

"Hey! What about the laundry?" Mathilda shouted after them in indignation.

They ignored her.

5. The Lady with the Painting

Booksmith was a small book store in downtown Rocky Beach that held its own despite competition from larger chains of book stores. This was mainly due to the splendid range of old and rare books about Rocky Beach and many other subjects.

One reason for the success was the friendly owner, Mr Smith, who in the meantime, for reasons of age, left the work more and more to his assistant Lesley Dimple. Cheerful as she was, she knew how to bind customers to the book store just like her boss. Bob in particular had a good connection with her, and so Booksmith had become a popular place for his research work alongside the local library.

When The Three Investigators entered the shop, Lesley was putting some books on the shelves. Classical music sounded from the office.

“Hi, investigators!” she said. “Nice of you to drop in again. How can I help you?”

Since there was no other customer in the store at the time, The Three Investigators came straight to the point. Jupiter told her about the woman they were looking for and what they knew about her.

“Yes, the woman was there,” Lesley remembered and directed the detectives to the back sections of the store. “Two days ago... She showed me her pendant and wanted to know what the mark on it meant. I had no idea, so I pulled out two books on Rocky Beach for her—a history of the place and an old book with pictures. She flipped through the volumes for quite a while. I don’t think she found anything. Anyway, she didn’t buy any of the books and she left the store disappointed. Does that help?”

“Only conditionally,” Jupiter said. “We must find out where the woman is. Did she have the painting we’re looking for?”

Lesley nodded. “Yes, a white yacht. She leaned it against a shelf while she flipped through the books. But I’m afraid I can’t tell you where she went after that.”

“Hmm...” Jupiter mumbled. That didn’t help them much.

“Were there other customers besides her at the same time?” Bob asked into the blue.

Lesley nodded. “Why, yes! Mrs Pearson, the solicitor. She had a little talk with the woman.”

Jupiter seized the opportunity. “Do you have an address for this Mrs Pearson?”

“I can tell you where her law firm is.” Lesley wrote the address on a piece of paper.

“Good luck, investigators!” Then she nodded at Bob. “And you, drop by again sometime...”

“Sure! Then I’ll have a little more time for you,” Bob smiled and The Three Investigators left the book store.

The lawyer’s office was just a few blocks away.

“Do you think that the woman with the pendant knows anything about the secret of the paintings?” Pete asked the First Investigator as soon as they were on the street.

“The way Aunt Mathilda described it, it was more of a chance purchase,” replied Jupiter. “But perhaps she was cleverly disguised.”

“This Escovedo could be acting on her behalf,” Pete continued.

Bob didn't think Pete's approach was far-fetched. "The woman discovered a secret in the painting and now she sends Escovedo to get the other paintings. If she wants to solve the mystery, she may need all three paintings."

"From the point of view of timing, it would fit," mumbled Jupiter thoughtfully. "The woman was with Aunt Mathilda and discovered the painting. Then Uncle Titus noticed that someone meddled with the inventory card box. A day later, this Escovedo turns up at Chief Reynolds's house." He paused, for in the meantime, they had reached the address Lesley had written down.

'Pearson & Pearson', it said on a fancy but not flashy metal sign. Jupiter pressed the bell.

The door opened. They went up a well-restored staircase to the first floor where they were welcomed by a nobly dressed but sceptically looking office employee.

"Jupiter Jones, Pete Crenshaw and Bob Andrews," Jupiter introduced themselves politely. "We do not wish to take up much of your valuable time. We only have a brief but urgent question for Mrs Pearson."

The secretary opened her mouth to dismiss the apparently not quite appropriate clientèle, but Jupiter added in a lowered voice: "We can really only speak to Mrs Pearson herself on this important matter. She will be very grateful if you will let us see her."

The secretary frowned, invited them in and pointed to a black leather seating area. "Then please sit down. I'll check with Mrs Pearson and see when her schedule permits."

Mrs Regina Pearson's diary immediately allowed it or the lawyer was simply curious, so a few minutes later, The Three Investigators were sitting opposite her in her expensively furnished office. She was a woman in her early forties, perfectly made-up, cool and not unattractive.

"Yes, I was at Booksmith two days ago," she replied to Jupiter's first question. "I like to poke around there."

"Did you meet another customer there?" Jupiter described the woman they were looking for—her approximate age, her colourful dress, her interest in a pendant, and the painting she was carrying.

Fortunately for them, Mrs Pearson remembered.

"Yes, I saw the woman. But whether she was carrying a painting, I can't tell. She was looking for something in a book and she just happened to ask me..." Mrs Pearson tilted her head a little to one side. "... Yes, she asked if I knew a book on signs and symbols, but I couldn't help her. She thanked me very nicely and that was it. I bought a paperback and left. Why are you interested in that lady? I mean, you just come in here, claim it's very important, and then ask—"

"We are actually looking for the painting the woman was carrying," Jupiter said and stood up, disappointed. "It was sold to her by mistake. You really have no idea where we can find the woman?"

Mrs Pearson stood up and shook her head. "I really would have liked to help you."

"Bummer," Bob summed it up perfectly when they left the lawyer's office. "This trail leads nowhere."

Pete nodded and let his eyes slide over the cars parked at the side of the road. A colourful bar sign across the street caught his attention. Suddenly, he tugged Jupe excitedly on his sleeve. "The guy from yesterday! Escovedo! There on the other side of the street!"

It was true. Standing next to a parked van was the man who had pushed so hard into Chief Reynolds's apartment, staring over at the detectives. He looked at the three boys for a

second or two and then he disappeared in a flash behind the van.

“Is he watching us?” Bob nervously asked.

Jupiter nodded. “This cannot be a coincidence. Maybe he suspects we’re on to something and wants to get ahead of us. But let’s turn the tables on him and grab him! After all, there are three of us!”

“What if he has a gun?” Pete asked.

“Pete, the element of surprise is with us! Bob and I will go around the van on the left and you take the right side! Then we can trap that guy!”

Pete clenched his fists and The Three Investigators ran off. After a few seconds, they had reached the van. Escovedo would not stand a chance. Pete broke away from the trio and sped around the right side of the van, and crashed into someone.

“I got him!” he yelled, but a sharp blow to the stomach made him flinch.

“Let go of me, Pete!” It was Jupiter, with whom he had collided in a hurry, and who finally freed himself from Pete with another powerful thrust.

Bob also lay panting on the ground. But where was Escovedo?

“Jeez, Pete! You’ve messed up everything!” Jupiter pointed out. “You shot around the corner like a rocket.”

Pete held his aching stomach. “I’m sorry,” he said guiltily, staring at an open door they were facing. “The pub! Escovedo must have escaped into the pub!”

6. Tricked!

Jupiter helped Bob to his feet and they entered the pub. It took them a moment to get used to the dark atmosphere. As it was early in the day, there were only a few guests present.

Jupiter asked energetically: "Did a person run through here a few seconds ago?"

Two men, who had been staring disparagingly at the boys as they came in, grinned broadly and shook their heads.

"We thought you greenhorns were going to have a double whisky," replied one.

The man behind the bar, who was drying a few glasses with his back to them, turned around and said: "No serving of alcohol to boys your age! That shouldn't be news to you!"

"That's not what we're after! We don't want a drink! We are only looking for a man—" Jupiter began, but a noise in the street distracted him. An engine had started. It took Jupiter only a second to make the connection. "Escovedo is back in the van!" he shouted and ran outside.

Pete and Bob raced out of the pub. But all they could see was the van disappearing around the next corner with squealing tyres.

"We are so stupid," Jupiter said and stamped his foot in anger.

"You mean Escovedo took off in that van?" Pete asked with a critical look at his friend.

"Of course! That guy set us up! He didn't sneak into the pub! He pushed the pub door open and then got back into the van through the sliding door. As soon as we were in the pub, he got out and took off! And the worst thing is, I could have guessed it myself! Because I'm sure the exact same van was parked at Reynolds's when we visited him yesterday!"

"So what?" Bob asked.

Jupiter thought for a moment. "We haven't yet systematically followed up all the leads we have!"

"So more investigations," Pete moaned.

"That's part of our job," explained Jupiter. "One—the names of the yachts in the paintings may help us. Maybe the yachts existed in reality and they lead us to some secret. Two—who owns the third of the paintings now? We will ask Uncle Titus about this. Three—we have a good chance of finding the woman herself, and thus her painting, via the symbol that she had enquired about. And finally—who painted the paintings? The painter should know the secret of his paintings. Perhaps this will bring us closer to the solution."

"It would certainly do," Bob said. "The problem will be that we'll have to get hold of one of the paintings to find the name of the painter. The painting itself was not signed. Perhaps the painter left his name on the back of the canvas or on the frame."

"So we're going to investigate back in the salvage yard," Jupiter said. "I'm sure we won't disappoint Chief Reynolds!"

When The Three Investigators entered the premises of the salvage yard with their bicycles some time later, Uncle Titus and Aunt Mathilda were cleaning a barbecue grill.

"This is a gift!" Uncle Titus remarked with a grin. "The owner, instead of cleaning it, preferred to buy a new one."

“Which I can understand,” Mathilda mumbled and rubbed the metal grate with a fierce grin. “But here you are, boys. One of you can take over my work from now on! You won’t get away again!”

As inconspicuously as possible, Pete pushed himself behind Bob.

“Actually, we had rather hoped to get more information about the white yacht painting,” Jupe said. “Did the woman who bought that painting from you the day before yesterday also enquired about the whereabouts of the other yacht paintings?”

“And do you remember the buyer of the third painting—the one that you sold years ago?” Bob added.

“And the names of the other yachts?” Pete called from behind.

“Ten minutes per answer,” Mathilda explained before Titus could open his mouth. She threw the rag to Jupiter, who immediately passed it on to Bob.

Bob desperately shoved it into Pete’s hands. “You start,” he said. “You’re physically the most gifted.”

And Aunt Mathilda was serious. Pete had to work the grill the whole time before Mathilda turned to Jupiter after critical appraisal of his Pete’s effort.

“So to your first question,” she said. “I’m afraid the woman didn’t ask me about the whereabouts of the other paintings. How could she know the other paintings existed? So now it’s your turn, Jupe.”

“That’s not fair,” protested Jupiter. “A follow-up question should be allowed!”

Mathilda nodded graciously.

“Did anyone else ask about the other paintings?”

Mathilda shook her head.

“Was there some strange guy here?” Jupiter described Mr Escovedo as best he could.

“That’s no longer a follow-up question! You’ll get your answer in exactly ten minutes!” With these words, Aunt Mathilda disappeared into the yard office to make coffee.

Exasperated, Jupiter grabbed the cleaning rag. “Call Inspector Cotta and tell him about the van,” he told Pete. “But only after you have washed your hands,” he added after a critical glance. “Bob, you take care of the names of the yachts. Maybe you can find out if they really existed. Start with *Samuel*... I’m afraid I don’t recall the other two names.”

Uncle Titus looked at them. “The yachts were called... *Samantha*... and *Gwendolyn*,” he whispered.

Bob grinned conspiratorially. Together with Pete, he disappeared into Headquarters.

As punctual as an alarm clock, Aunt Mathilda appeared on the scene again after ten minutes and reported what she knew. In fact, Mr Escovedo had visited the salvage yard. At least Mathilda confirmed Jupiter’s description of him.

“But even this man didn’t specifically ask about the yacht paintings,” Mathilda said. “He was just rummaging around, wanting to know if we made a note of who we sold paintings to. He said he was a collector. So I took out Titus’s box and asked if he was looking for something specific. But then he just disappeared and said he would come back to it. He was a strange guy.”

Jupiter triumphed. “And Escovedo actually came back to it—as a burglar! For it was he, Uncle Titus, who stole the inventory cards from the box. But do you remember who you sold the third painting to?”

“Not a peep, Titus! First the work, then the wages,” Aunt Mathilda threw briskly in between and pointed to the cleaning rag. “Where’s Bob? It’s his turn now!”

“I hope this doesn’t become a habit,” Pete groaned as The Three Investigators sat together at Headquarters a while later. “If I have to work for information, then I’ll leave The Three Investigators! In the old days, at least our work here was paid in dollars!”

“But at a miserable hourly wage,” Jupiter added. “And fortunately we are rarely dependent on information from Aunt Mathilda.”

After Bob had also washed the cleaning agent off his hands extensively, they set about compiling the latest information.

There was no doubt that Escovedo was after the paintings. He must have found Chief Reynolds’s address from Uncle Titus’s inventory cards. But what did Escovedo want to do with the artistically worthless paintings? The story of the famous movie director who collected items from ships was dismissed by The Three Investigators. A famous Hollywood director would never have risked such a flat-out burglary.

The most valuable clue was provided by Uncle Titus. He had remembered the name of the customer who had bought the third painting years ago. His name was Rupert Horowitz. At that time he ran a small general store in the canyon that led behind Rocky Beach into the Santa Monica Mountains. In the meantime, however, the old man had given up his business. Unfortunately it was to be feared that Horowitz had also received a visit from Escovedo. Otherwise, there was still hope.

Bob’s research into the yachts, on the other hand, had not produced any concrete results. He couldn’t find any information on the whereabouts of three yachts named *Samuel*, *Samantha*, and *Gwendolyn*. After all, Inspector Cotta’s people were looking for the grey van following Pete’s call. So Jupiter saw the best chance to make progress in the case was to visit Rupert Horowitz. Just as he was about to suggest this, the telephone rang.

“Maybe Cotta has discovered the van,” Jupiter said and picked up the phone. But to his surprise it was Lesley from Booksmith.

“The woman you are looking for is now here at the book store,” she said in a subdued voice. “Should I hold her until you get here?”

7. An Enigmatic Pendant

When The Three Investigators rushed into the book store, sweating, they thought at first that they had arrived too late. They didn't see anyone at the customer area. Bob went ahead to the office and curiously opened the door.

Lesley sat on a wooden chair and held a tea cup in her hand. On another chair was a woman with dark hair, who wore a strangely colourful dress and who had turned around with interest at the sound of the door opening.

"Oh, there you are," cried Lesley. "Let me introduce to you, this is Miss Anita Caballero! And these are the boys I told you about! Bob, Pete and Jupiter!" As always, the book store assistant called Bob first as she had simply taken a fancy to him.

"Good afternoon, Miss Caballero," Jupiter said and stepped forward. "We are glad to have finally found you. You're the person who bought that yacht painting at The Jones Salvage Yard, aren't you?"

"That's right." Miss Caballero nodded at them. At first glance, she did not appear unfriendly. "And now you want to buy the painting back?"

"Not necessarily," replied Jupiter. "Probably it will be enough for us to get a good look at it." He pointed to the camera he was carrying. "We would like to take some photos of the painting!"

"If that's all there is to it, nothing should stand in its way. We're done anyway." With one sip, Miss Caballero finished her tea and got up. She was a small but wiry woman. Jupiter thought she was in her early fifties, but she seemed very athletic. Her eyes sparkled with enterprise.

"Thank you very much for the tea and for the friendly conversation," Anita Caballero told Lesley.

The assistant played the remark down with a short hand movement. "I'm sorry I couldn't help you with your pendant... but I'm afraid we have no more books about the history of Rocky Beach."

"That's okay. I will get on with my business," the lady said. "But now follow me, boys! We're going to the harbour!"

They said goodbye to Lesley, left the book store. After a few metres, they turned and walked along the main road leading towards the sea.

"What's your interest in that painting?" Miss Caballero asked.

"Well, originally there were three paintings all together," Jupiter said cautiously. "We would like to know something about their origin. Are you familiar with a man named Escovedo here in Rocky Beach?"

The question came as a surprise, and if Miss Caballero knew Escovedo, she at least cleverly hid it.

"No," she said with a tiny hint of astonishment on her face. "Esco... vedo? Who is he?"

"That man is also interested in the paintings," Jupe replied.

Miss Caballero seemed satisfied with that answer. For a few steps, they remained silent. More out of habit, Jupiter occasionally turned and looked around.

Suddenly, his face froze. “Escovedo is following us,” he hissed at Bob and Pete. “There, across the street!”

But when the other two detectives looked around, Escovedo had already disappeared from the scene.

Jupiter hesitated a moment, then whispered to the lady: “Miss Caballero, I can’t explain everything now, but someone is following us and we have to lose him! I suggest that we go into the department store here.”

Without comment, the woman submitted to the abrupt change of direction. The small group entered a department store, took the escalator to an upper floor, then went down again by lift. Jupiter chose a side exit, from which they returned to the main street via several, hardly frequented roads. There was nothing more to be seen of their pursuer.

Now they were almost at the harbour, where they could easily mingle with the many tourists, joggers and skaters. Miss Caballero shook her head in surprise and led them to a pier where several small motor and sailing boats were moored.

“I travel by boat,” she explained, “so I always have my hotel room with me!”

Shortly afterwards, Miss Caballero directed the three boys to a cabin cruiser boat of about ten metres in length. Jupiter noted with a glance from the writing on the side of the boat that it was rented from Marina del Rey.

The boys jumped on deck and Miss Caballero unlocked the door to the cabin. Down a few narrow steps, they entered the cabin. It was small, but they all fitted in just fine. In fact, it looked really cosy. The impressive boat was equipped with the essential features of a home, such as a galley, a small dining area, and a bed at one side. On the opposite side was a bench with a small table. And above the bench leaned the painting with the white yacht.

Jupiter stepped up to it. It was a wonderfully light and elegant yacht named *Gwendolyn*. In the background of the painting, he could see a colourful island. Green palms swayed over red parasols on a lemon yellow beach. Women were swimming in the sea. The scenery was not much different from the one in Chief Reynolds’s painting.

The First Investigator pulled out his camera and took several photos. Then he asked Miss Caballero if they could remove the frame to take a look if anything was concealed in the frame and behind the canvas.

She nodded and The Three Investigators squeezed themselves into the seat. Pete pulled out his pocket knife and carefully removed the white frame. Then they began to take a close look at everything—the canvas, the frame, and the inner edges.

Miss Caballero watched them sceptically, ready to intervene immediately if she thought the dismantling went too far. But no matter how hard the detectives searched, they couldn’t find a single clue that would help them. The puzzle, if any, had to lie in the painting itself.

When they had put the painting back into the frame, The Three Investigators stood up disappointed, but Miss Caballero asked them to sit back down for a moment. “I would like to ask you something... Why do you have to take a painting apart like that to examine it?”

“We are looking for the name of the painter,” Jupiter said succinctly. “I’m afraid the painting isn’t signed.”

Anita Caballero nodded. “I have already noticed that too. Very well. I have done you a favour, and I would like to ask you for a little something in return.”

With one flick of the wrist, she took off a necklace whose pendant had previously been hidden by her dress. She placed it on the table. The pendant was oval and had two V’s inscribed on it—one upright and one upside-down superimposed on it. Jupe took the pendant in his hand. It was made of metal.

“I want to know about the origin of this inscription,” said Miss Caballero. “For it is the key to my origins.”

“I don’t quite understand,” Jupiter said.

Miss Caballero sat on the bunk bed. “Then hear my story...” she began. “I call myself Anita Caballero, but I don’t know my real name. I grew up on a small island off the west coast of Mexico. My parents, or the people I long thought to be my parents, were natives who lived there.

“At some point I noticed that my skin colour, my whole appearance did not fit there. I was too fair-skinned, and always got sunburned. The other kids teased me about it even though they liked me. I felt that my parents on the island couldn’t be my real parents. When they thought I was old enough, they told me in tears that they had found me as a small child near their village and then raised me. For many years I didn’t care about my real origins. I had a happy childhood on my island.

“Later I went to the mainland, learned, studied and built up a successful trading business under the name of ‘Anita Caballero’. The business went well and I became a respected woman—respected by everyone, but I was alone. Something was disturbing me, and slowly I became restless. I didn’t know what it was for a long time. The feeling grew stronger. Finally, I sold my business. I realized... what I really wanted was to find out where I came from—in particular, who my real parents were. I would never rest easy until I find out my origins.”

The Three Investigators remained silent, especially Jupiter. Although he knew who his parents were, he had lost them in an accident, and he could empathize with the situation of the woman. If the story she had told them was true, he still had to be cautious.

After a brief moment, Jupiter said: “So the only clue to your origin is this pendant?”

Miss Caballero nodded. “I was wearing it when I was found by my foster parents.”

Jupiter looked closely at the pendant. “It really seems to have something to do with Rocky Beach. ‘RB-Cal’ could be short for Rocky Beach, California. But it could be any place in California with the initials R and B. It could also indicate a person—Ricky Brown and a hundred thousand other names... or a company... There are infinite possibilities!”

Miss Caballero looked at him. It was a sad look, but not without hope. “Too bad,” she said. “But I’m not giving up.”

Then Jupiter pulled out one of The Three Investigators’ business cards and handed it to Miss Caballero.

“We are investigators,” Jupiter said. “I don’t know if Lesley told you this, but we’re on another case and we normally don’t do two jobs at once. So I’m afraid we can’t help you at the moment. However, there is one person I know who could potentially be of help to you, especially since this person has learned a great deal about Rocky Beach and its people in the course of his professional career—knowledge that is not recorded in any book in the world. This person has time—lots of time. I imagine that you two would get along very well.”

Miss Caballero raised her head in interest.

“We will introduce you to Rocky Beach’s former chief of police, Samuel Reynolds,” Jupiter said. “Since he’s no longer on the police force, he’s been a little bored. Probably, he will be happy to help you. We can check with him right away!”

At that moment, they heard a noise outside. The boat received a shock and then swayed slightly. Someone had jumped back from the boat onto the pier and was now moving away with rapid strides.

They had not been careful enough... Someone had overheard them!

8. Pete in a Panic!

“Who dared to enter my boat to spy on me?” exclaimed Miss Caballero, startled.

Jupiter had already jumped to the cabin door and ripped it open. “My money’s on Escovedo,” he shouted, looking around the pier but there’s no one there.

Thoughtfully, he returned to the boat’s cabin. “If we leave the boat now, the painting is in danger. Escovedo will not be afraid to steal it. We should put it somewhere safe... or I have a much better idea! We leave the painting here and lure—”

“No!” Pete said quickly. “Idea rejected!”

“You don’t know what I’m going to say yet,” Jupe said.

“Yes, I do! I can guess exactly what your line is going to be—‘we’ll lure the man here and set a trap for him’. And I can even tell you which of the three of us will hide in the boat and wait for Escovedo.”

“Good! Then everything is clear,” said Jupiter with satisfaction. “Let’s do it this way then. Bob, you stay here.”

“Sure,” Bob said and grinned.

Pete was silent. “Isn’t that my job?” he asked. “Ambush? Dangerous operations?”

“But we know you are scared... and that is understandable,” replied Jupe. “Escovedo is definitely very dangerous.”

“I could just wait somewhere outside and keep an eye on the boat and the painting,” Pete said. “If he turns up, then I’ll go after him.” He felt that he was being deprived of the honour. “I’ll keep my distance. I can get that well under control.”

“Fine,” Jupiter gave in. “If you want to... but Bob will stay with you.”

“I don’t need a chaperone! Wouldn’t you two rather go to Horowitz’s house? If Escovedo is not coming back here, it’s likely he’ll cause trouble there!”

“Okay, it is also much safer here at the busy harbour than in the lonely mountains,” Jupe agreed.

“I don’t understand,” Miss Caballero interjected. “Why are you always talking about this Escovedo? And why is he trying to steal my painting?”

“That’s what we are trying to find out,” Jupiter said. “For now, I suggest that you go see Mr Reynolds. Give him our regards and tell him we sent you. Pete is hiding here to ambush Escovedo. But be careful, Pete. If he steals the painting, then you follow him. Hopefully, he’ll lead you to his hideout, and perhaps to his employer. But you’ll probably be here for hours if we have the dubious pleasure of meeting Escovedo at Mr Horowitz’s. Either way, we’ll be back for you... Let’s go! There’s no time to lose.”

Jupe, Bob and Miss Caballero left the boat.

As planned, Pete got out of the boat and sought cover behind a nearby steel container. Jupiter and Bob got Miss Caballero a taxi and told the driver Reynolds’s address. They took another taxi to Bob’s house to get Bob’s car.

Without wasting any more time, the two detectives got into the Beetle and made their way to the canyon where Mr Horowitz lived, who, according to Uncle Titus, should have the third yacht painting—the one with the yacht named *Samantha*.

After a while, it became too boring for Pete behind the container. Besides, he was still offended because Jupiter had earlier suggested that Bob trail Escovedo. Miss Caballero had left him the key to her boat. Maybe he could take another look at the painting. Imagine if he found something Jupiter had overlooked.

Pete looked along the pier. A short distance away, a man was cleaning his boat. Escovedo was not in sight. It could take forever for the guy to come back, if he came back at all. Probably, he could be long gone by now or he was on Jupiter's heels. Pete carefully got out from behind the container. With a few steps, he was back on Miss Caballero's boat and took out the key.

When he was inside the cabin, his courage suddenly left him. To be on the safe side, he locked it from the inside. Pete could hear the waves crashing against the hull. Then he heard someone walked by on the pier with firm steps. It didn't sound like someone who wanted to stay hidden. When the sound of the footsteps left, Pete stretched and took a deep sigh of relief.

His eyes fell on the painting. It was a beautiful white yacht—smaller and slimmer than the one in Reynolds's painting. The bow foam sprayed very finely over the green-blue sea. And then there was that kitschy background? Pete took a step closer.

A shadow darkened one of the tiny boat windows for a fraction of a second and Pete flinched in horror. He listened. Far away someone was shouting something incomprehensible. A while later, he heard nothing else—only sounds from the countless seagulls gliding past.

Pete relaxed and looked very closely at the painting again. The light fell sideways on the surface, so that even the elevations of the layers of paint were visible. They seemed like tiny mountains. He had never stood so consciously before a painting before. Pete stroked the painting very gently. His fingers felt the sea, the yacht, and the island.

Then he noticed something. Was he wrong? His hand repeated the movement. And suddenly a thought came to him. That's it! This could be the solution to the mystery of the paintings!

Pete thought for a moment. If Escovedo showed up later and he chased after him, valuable time would be lost. In any case, it made sense to leave Jupe and Bob a note about his possible discovery. He looked for a writing pad, pulled out his pen and sat down at the small table. He started writing:

Hi Jupe & Bob,

I'm done here and will get back to you soon. I just took a good look at the painting and I think figured something out...

A slight scratching made him sit up and brought him back to the present moment. It came from the door. Pete's eyes fell on the handle in horror. It moved slowly down! Was that Escovedo? But the door was still locked. But the intruder certainly had suitable tools with him.

There was no doubt that the noise came from the lock. Pete knew the sound all too well—he owned a lock pick set himself. Involuntarily, he tore the note from the pad. How much time did he have left? Was it enough time to find a hiding place? It just had to be enough! The lock was still being picked.

Pete looked around in panic. He discovered a small storage cupboard built into the bow of the boat. He opened the door and fortunately, it was almost empty. It had to be just about right for him. Pete quickly squeezed himself into the cupboard and closed the wooden door

from the inside. It was very tight there and he had to pull his legs close to his body. Through the slats he had at least a good view of what was going on in the cabin.

The cabin door was not yet open. Pete tried to control his breathing, which was so heavy with excitement. Why had he been so careless once again? Out of sheer defiance? What was he trying to prove? But all that didn't help him now.

With a creaking sound, the cabin door was suddenly opened. Light from the outside came in and it became brighter. A draught also came in. The slats obscured Pete's view to the outside. All he saw were two black sports shoes and two dark, stained trouser legs. Slowly the man came down the stairs. Now Pete saw his hands. One of them... was clutching a gun.

After seconds that seemed eternal, the face finally followed—the tanned skin, the dark hair. It was Escovedo! He looked around searching. Then he saw the painting and went towards it.

"Take it and get out of here," Pete begged silently.

But Escovedo stopped. He whistled softly to himself, climbed the small stairs and closed the door to the cabin. Then he turned around and sat down on the bed. From there, he looked at the painting—whistling—for more than a minute. He seemed to have plenty of time.

Pete was already in a cold sweat. His left leg was tingling, but that was not his main problem. "He's got the painting so he should finally go away!" he thought to himself.

All of a sudden, Escovedo laughed. An idea seemed to have occurred to him. He put his gun aside, pulled out a lighter, lit it and held it against the wooden ceiling. If he wanted to destroy the boat... Pete's heart stopped. If he burned the vessel, Pete was in a deadly trap!

Suddenly, Pete could hear someone approaching the boat from the pier. "Hello! Lady!" The person called out.

Escovedo put the lighter back in his pocket in a flash and crept to the cabin door.

"Are you on board, lady? Can I have a word with you? I have a problem with my boat! ... Hello?"

Apparently, the man was going to ask Miss Caballero for something. Pete saw Escovedo take out a long knife and press himself against the side of the cabin door. A thousand thoughts shot through Pete's head at once. Did the burglar really want to set fire to the boat to destroy the painting? Then Pete might now have the chance to draw attention to his predicament by shouting loudly. On the other hand, he could reveal to Escovedo where he was hiding.

Pete became anxious. Maybe Escovedo knew long ago that he was hidden here, but it was all too late anyway. Pete had to decide quickly. Eventually, that man out there would go away if no one answered him.

"Hello?" it came from outside again. Silence. Then the footsteps began to move away.

It had to be now! Pete took a breath and started shouting: "Help! I'm trapped in here! Sir, please get me out!" It sounded muffled and Pete wondered in fear if he could be heard outside. "Help me!" he repeated loudly.

Escovedo turned around. His eyes had narrowed into slits. "Shut up, you idiot," he hissed.

Slowly he came towards Pete's hiding place. The gun was pointed at the cupboard door. "I'll get rid of you once and for all!"

Pete felt the panic in him. He realized that everything had gone wrong.

The air shimmered in the heat. The two detectives had rolled down the side windows and enjoyed the light wind. Bob shifted the car back from third to second gear. The road through

the canyon led uphill and his Beetle was struggling to keep its pace. A small line of cars had already formed behind them.

“Why are people in such a hurry,” he muttered. “Fortunately we have to turn right now.”

When they reached a small intersection and Bob flicked the right signal, one could almost feel the relief of the drivers behind them. Leading up the side of the canyon, they were on more of an unpaved road than a real road.

Now they were really going uphill. In second gear, the Beetle chugged past small woodsheds that were hidden in the shade of the forest to the left and right of the road, where a strange mix of artists, mavericks, war veterans and retirees had retreated there from the noisy life in Los Angeles. Some of them had even built their shacks high up in the trees and thus probably made a childhood dream come true.

Now and then, the narrow road branched off and Bob had long since lost track of the route. But without any uncertainty, Jupiter showed him the direction at every junction. They passed the sheriff’s office. The sheriff was just leaning against his car and looked at Bob’s car thoughtfully. He probably wondered if the two boys were up to something fishy as there were not too many visitors around here.

In the meantime, the investigators had reached the higher areas of the canyon and the newer and more expensive buildings of the rich city refugees from Los Angeles were increasingly mixed in between the simple houses.

“We’re here,” Jupiter suddenly said, pointing to an old but comparatively large wooden building that lay about thirty metres away from the road in the shade of the trees. Bob looked for the best parking opportunity and let the car earn a cooling-off period after the strenuous drive uphill.

“Is this where old Mr Horowitz lives?”

Jupiter nodded. “For several years now, Uncle Titus has been telling me. He has moved here from the south of Los Angeles. Well, I hope the third painting finally gives us the decisive clue!”

They followed the path that led to the house. Under the trees parked an old Chevrolet which probably had been rusting for a while. To get into the house, they had to cross a wooden terrace where a few old chairs stood untidily around a small table. On the ground between some dirty fabric, there was a chain saw that was disassembled.

Bob’s eyes fell on the entrance door which was ajar. This was probably the usual practice here. What’s there to steal around here?

They knocked on the wooden door.

“Mr Horowitz?” Jupiter called out.

Silence—except for a bird chirping somewhere in the trees.

“Mr Horowitz?”

No answer.

“Hello?”

Carefully, Jupiter pushed the door open and they entered. It was musty and dark inside.

“Mr Horowitz?” Jupiter called out again. “We just want to ask you something. Are you here?”

They hesitated. There were several windows, but all the curtains were drawn. Only slowly did their eyes get used to the diffuse light. Jupiter and Bob’s mouth remained open in surprise.

“What happened here?” Bob asked. “It looks like—”

“—As if a fight had taken place,” Jupiter added in a whisper. “Look! The table is broken. The chair is on the floor.” He took a step forward and something crunched under his feet.

“Broken glass! Look out, Bob!”

“What happened?” Bob asked. “Did Escovedo strike?”

“Yes. It looks like we are too late! And I had hoped that he’s not here yet!”

Carefully Jupiter stepped to one of the windows, drew the curtain and the light shone in. Now they could see everything. It was quite a mess in Horowitz’s living room.

The glass pieces came from a large vase that had fallen over. But Jupiter’s attention was now focused on the walls of the room. There were all kinds of photographs and newspaper clippings hanging there. They documented the great forest fire that had raged in the area a few years ago. The houses had been enclosed by the fire from three sides and only by a miracle had they been spared from destruction. But it was not the natural disaster that interested Jupiter.

He went over to the other side of the wall. There, Horowitz had placed several photographs and paintings of ships, of harbours and of the sea. In the middle, there was an area that had been left free, which presumably formed the centre of the collection.

Jupe came closer, pulled out his flashlight and examined the wall closely.

“This is where it was hung,” said the First Investigator. “The third painting. The size fits perfectly. You can see the dark edge of dust that has been around the frame all these years. We’re too late, Bob! Escovedo has already taken the painting.”

“And Horowitz?”

“Seems that there was a fight,” Jupiter said. “The old man fought back. I hope nothing has happened to him.”

“We must search the house,” Bob said. “Maybe he’s lying somewhere and needs help!”

Jupiter nodded. Silently he wished Escovedo had gone far away because the man was becoming more and more dangerous.

They searched the other rooms one by one. Apart from a few pots with food left-overs and a half-full glass of beer, they found no trace of the old man... until Bob saw a chair leaning against a door handle preventing the door from being opened from the inside.

He rushed over and removed the chair, and opened the door. It was dark inside. “Hello! Mr Horowitz?” Bob called out.

Then they heard a faint scratching sound.

“Mr Horowitz!” Jupiter’s voice went crazy with excitement as he searched for a light switch.

When the light came on, the two detectives flinched in horror at an old man lying on the floor, gagged and bound. His eyes looked at the boys, relieved.

9. The Oil Baron and the Painter

“Mr Horowitz!” Jupiter announced with a mixture of pride and relief. “We will help you out immediately!”

A few minutes later, Jupiter and Bob were sitting with the old man on the chairs on the wooden terrace of his house.

Horowitz was unhurt. He was a grey-haired man who had become thin over the years, but they could still see that he must have been quite strong at one time. With a nervous gesture, he wiped his hands on his brightly spotted vest and reached for the drink that Bob had brought from the kitchen. But the shock was still written all over Mr Horowitz’s face. His imprisonment could have had a nasty ending.

“You two must be my guardian angels,” Horowitz said in a croaky voice and took a sip. “Without you, who knows how long I would be locked in the storeroom! Even if I could shout, there is hardly anyone around here anyway.”

Jupiter nodded. “Escovedo is a ruthless thug! I’m not sure he would have come back to free you.”

“Esco... who?”

“We believe the man who assaulted you is a man named Escovedo—at least that’s what he called himself. We have met him earlier.” Jupiter described the burglar. “What is most striking about Escovedo is a habit in his speech. He often ends sentences with an added ‘yes’.”

Horowitz’s face lit up: “That was the guy! I am absolutely sure! But how do you know all this? Why are you here? What’s going on?”

Instead of giving an answer, Jupiter handed Mr Horowitz a business card of The Three Investigators.

Horowitz accepted it, held it a little way away from him and studied it. “So, Jones... now I remember! You are the nephew of Titus Jones! So you run a detective agency!”

“Yes. And this is my friend Bob. Pete is currently on an investigation elsewhere. We’re on the trail of a certain painting...”

“The painting you’re looking for was stolen by this Escovedo,” Horowitz interrupted him. “I shouldn’t have fought the thug! I’m an old man. Why didn’t I just give him the painting? Of course it’s a beautiful painting—a souvenir, but my life shouldn’t be worth it!”

“A souvenir?” Jupiter asked.

“Indeed.” Horowitz took a sip and went on to report: “At first this guy tried to buy the painting from me. I refused. So he just pushed me aside, went up to the painting and lifted it off the wall. Confound his impudence! I couldn’t believe it! I tried to grab back the painting from him and there was a little fight.” Horowitz smiled. “I gave him a right hook. After all, I am an old sailor who once knew how to fight. But unfortunately he got me badly.”

“He tied you up and locked you in the storeroom,” Bob surmised.

“So it was. A most impertinent act.”

“When did all this happen?” Jupe asked.

Horowitz was thinking. “I must have been in the storeroom for several hours. When this guy came up to me, I was repairing my chain saw... otherwise I could have used it to chase

him away!" He giggled more to cheer himself up than about his humour. "Why is everyone suddenly after this painting?"

"Everyone?"

"Well, that guy there and you! For years, the painting hung neatly and unnoticed in my humble little shack. No one cared about the little yacht... By the way, I would have loved to buy all three paintings, but I didn't have enough cash."

"So you knew about the existence of the other paintings?"

"Yes! I saw all three of them at your uncle's place. I remember it like it was today. And not only that, I know the yachts very well. After all, I was at sea for a long time on all three of them!"

Jupiter needed a moment to process this surprising news. The conversation turned out to be more and more interesting. He winked at Bob, who understood the instruction and pulled out his notepad.

"So the yachts really existed?" Jupiter postulated.

Horowitz took a sip. "I told you before, I was a sailor! The yachts belonged to Jeff Rothman. You know Jeff Rothman?" The unsuspecting faces of Jupiter and Bob signalled to Horowitz that he was wrong in his assumption.

"I see you have no idea. But why should you? You are much too young! Jeff Rothman was the founder of Rothman Oil."

"Oh, Rothman Oil!" At least Jupiter and Bob had heard about the oil company.

"He was known as the oil baron," Horowitz continued. "That's what we called him. He's long dead now."

"And this Mr Rothman owned the yachts?" Jupiter returned to the subject.

"Yes, all three—a hobby of the old man's," Horowitz said. "He had several ships as well, but they were for his business. A couple of guys and I were part of his sailing crew. After some teething troubles, the oil company was quite successful and Rothman took some time out on his yachts—at least for several years... until suddenly, from one day to the next, he lost interest in his yachts."

"The company had start-up difficulties?" Jupiter interrupted him eagerly. Suddenly, Horowitz's narrative flow went too fast.

"Well, old Rothman first drilled for oil on the beach in Venice, right around the corner here. Venice was the scene of the oil fever at that time. But all in all, it was a somewhat lucrative business. Rothman got rid of his drilling rigs early enough and took care of much more successful ventures. At that time, he renamed the Venice Oil Company to Rothman Oil, as the company is still called today. From then on, he made a lot of money. And now the entire empire is owned by his son Samuel Rothman."

"So he named his son after one of his yachts?" Jupe wondered.

"It was the other way round. Old Rothman named his yachts after his closest relatives."

"Do you know anything about the fate of the yachts?" Jupe asked.

Mr Horowitz laughed. "Sure. But first, tell me why you're after the paintings."

"The reason is simple," Jupe explained. "One of the paintings belong to one of our clients, and we want to recover it for him. He owned the painting with the green yacht named *Samuel*. But to find it, we must solve the mystery surrounding the paintings, possibly all three of them. We discovered that that man named Escovedo suddenly became interested in the paintings as well. It was strange because the paintings had been hanging unnoticed in various places for years and apparently no one else cared about them. So they must have a secret inside that suddenly aroused interest and we want to find out about that as well."

“That’s why we need your help,” Bob added. “In the meantime, there is more—Escovedo is a dangerous man and he must be caught.”

Horowitz seemed to be convinced. Thoughtfully he looked at his empty glass. “Could you get me another Coke please, Bob?”

While Bob politely jumped up and ran into the kitchen, Horowitz remained silent as he stared through the shaggy branches of the trees into the blue sky, seemingly trying to recall old times.

“It’s been a long time, and I’m already mixing up the years,” he finally began when Bob put the drink on his table. “It’s all in the distant past and above it all is the mist of time.

“When the old Rothman had thrown us sailors out, I hadn’t been interested in the yachts for a long time. That’s how disappointed I was. It wasn’t until I found this painting at your uncle’s place that my memory came back.

“In the meantime, many years had passed. I felt that it was a wonderful time back then when Rothman was still doing well and we had taken the odd sailing trip or two. Well, the yacht I mostly sailed on was *Samuel*. The boat must have been inherited by Rothman’s son. I don’t think he scrapped it. After all, it bears his name. I suppose you’ll find it in Marina del Rey harbour today, where most people have their yachts and boats moored.

“Then there was *Samantha*, also known as the ‘Red One’—the largest of the three yachts. Rothman named it after his wife. This was the yacht whose painting hung in my house until noon today. It was an elegant boat, yes, but a bit too ponderous for my taste. A few years ago, I heard that it was brought ashore. It is probably now moored at the harbour in a town north of here and houses a prestigious restaurant.” He saw Bob’s pen scribbling over the notepad and he gave him the name of the town.

“And there’s one more yacht?” Jupiter asked.

Horowitz coughed. “Yes, and then the smallest but finest of the three yachts—one that you could fall in love with—white, slim, agile, and fast. It was named after Rothman’s mother, *Gwendolyn*.”

“And?”

“Where the yacht *Gwendolyn* lies and whether it still exists, I can’t be sure. Nobody can, except for two people, and one of them is no longer alive...

“One day, *Gwendolyn* left the port of Long Beach for a voyage. To this day, I don’t know where it went. Only Samuel Rothman and my colleague Paddy O’Rien were on board. Officially it was said that Samuel Rothman wanted to go on an excursion, but it turned out to be a bit longer than planned... and it ended badly.”

Horowitz took a sip and looked thoughtfully between Jupiter and Bob. “A storm came up. The yacht had engine problems. It drifted around and finally capsized in the storm. Samuel and the sailor managed to save themselves. The yacht is still missing.”

Horowitz took another sip again. Suddenly, the tension on his face had disappeared. “These things can happen,” he said tiredly, putting the glass down. “What’s the point of these old stories?”

“But you didn’t believe the explanation for the accident?” Jupiter asked.

Mr Horowitz was struggling for an answer. “All right, if you’re so interested, there were two things that puzzled me. Paddy was a good mate of mine. After the accident, he changed. We were still getting along, but something had come between us ever since. He never spoke a word about the trip. I would have expected that he would be overflowing with stories when he survived such a storm at sea.”

“Indeed! You should have some stories to tell,” Jupiter said. “But what was the second reason for your doubts?”

“Old Rothman himself. He was suddenly a different person. After all this had happened, he never set foot on any of his yachts. He just threw us sailors off. Two years later, Rothman died. He had aged far too fast.”

“Maybe it’s all connected,” Jupe said thoughtfully. “A yacht sank... A man lost the desire to live... *Gwendolyn*... It seems to be about the painting that our friend Pete is guarding. Mr Horowitz, you said the yacht was named after the mother of the oil baron? When did she die? At the same time when the yacht sank?”

“No, some years earlier—from a disease, as I recall. Old Rothman barely coped with the loss.”

“We should take another look at the painting of Anita Caballero,” said Jupiter. “We must have missed something!”

“Maybe it’s about a treasure,” Bob spontaneously remarked. “*Gwendolyn* may have gone on some secret mission at that time. The yacht must have sunk with some kind of treasure on board, which was never recovered. Everything went completely wrong. Old Rothman was disappointed, even more than that—he was devastated!”

“I have spun similar things together,” Horowitz said. “Strange how quickly this suddenly comes up. The old stories are back. A treasure? Perhaps... I never understood how Paddy could afford such a big house.”

Jupiter looked at him questioningly.

“Well, Paddy had a great house,” Horowitz continued. “He built it himself a few years after the accident. It’s right around here, at the top of the canyon where the rich guys from Los Angeles are building their palaces now. Paddy’s been telling people he won the lottery... but I never believed it.”

“Is your buddy still alive?” Jupiter asked.

Horowitz shook his head. “No. As I told you, there’s only one witness left and that’s Samuel Rothman himself. Paddy’s dead, but his wife is still alive. And you know what I think? My guess is that the painter of the three paintings was none other than Paddy O’Rien!”

That was the next big surprise Mr Horowitz had to offer. They now had the painter’s name!

“What makes you think so?” Jupiter immediately asked.

“Paddy always drew—sunsets, boats, harbours, fish, besides, he knew the three yachts. In fact, I found it strange that he never showed me the yacht paintings.”

“Perhaps they were created long after the accident,” Bob pondered, “at a time when your contact was falling apart...”

“Possibly.” Horowitz shrugged and stood up. Slowly, he regained his strength. “Now I’m going for a beer,” he explained. “Will you join me in a drink?”

“No thanks,” Jupiter replied. “Besides, I would like to visit Paddy O’Rien’s widow now.”

“But we shouldn’t forget about Pete,” Bob threw in with a glance at the clock. “I hope he is not in danger. A moment ago a thought occurred to me, Jupe, that might be a bit strange in your eyes. What if Escovedo and Miss Caballero are working together?”

“I don’t think so,” Jupiter declared confidently. The conversation with Horowitz had made him all tingly. He felt that he was very close to the secret of the paintings. “Now that we are around here, let’s take this opportunity to ask Mrs O’Rien to take us to her late husband’s painting workshop. We look around quickly, then we go back to the harbour. But before that, we should check on our answering machine at Headquarters. Maybe Pete left a message.”

Mr Horowitz allowed them to use the phone. But there was no message from Pete. So they said goodbye to the former sailor and asked him to immediately inform the police of

Escovedo's attack.

10. Horrible Awakening

Pete's head was in pain. He tried to reach in and rub his temples to soothe it, but he couldn't. His hands wanted to obey but something held them back.

He blinked, infinitely tired. It was so bright, so impenetrable. Everything swayed in a pleasant, calm way—back and forth, back and forth. The light was blurring and Pete dropped into a state of unconsciousness. Only much later did images appear in his mind's eye—distorted images but in bright colours.

There was Escovedo standing in front of him, about to throw a knife at him. But Pete could not escape. He was firmly tied to the wooden wall—at the mercy of the knife thrower. Helpless. Pete wanted to scream in fear, but it remained a silent scream. The knife thrower came closer, with a grin on his face. Why didn't Pete get his hands free? His feet? Again Pete yelled out and this time with so much strength that he woke up from his own voice.

Suddenly everything was much clearer. Through small windows, the light fell into the cabin. His head still hurt, but Pete now slowly realized where he was—not tied to any wooden wall. He lay on the floor, on his side, his back against a wall. And no knife-throwing Escovedo was in sight. There didn't seem to be anyone there at all... or was he wrong? Pete breathed more calmly, but he did not relax. His hands... his feet... this was no longer a dream—he was actually tied up!

Gently the waves rocked the boat back and forth. Rhythmically, the sun was blinking in his face as if everything was a game. The water clapped with gurgling sounds against the hull of the boat. The engine of Miss Caballero's boat was silent.

Pete tried to sit up, but it didn't work. Where was he—was the boat in port? Through the windows, which were much too high, he could only see the blue sky. Also, Pete could see that the yacht painting was gone. And where was Escovedo? Thank goodness, he didn't set the boat on fire.

Pete struggled to keep a clear head. Somehow he had to get out of his shackles... before Escovedo reappeared. Pete jerked the tape to loosen it a bit. The movements hurt his skin. He could use a knife now but there wasn't one in sight.

Just a moment! Wasn't there something pressing against his body when he wriggled up? His lock pick set! Suddenly, it blew through his mind that he had his lock pick set with him! The metal had sharp edges.

The case was in his front pocket. But how could he get it out without having one hand free? Pete rolled over on his stomach and lay down flat. Then he put his forehead on the floor and managed to pull his knees up. He pushed his bottom up, so that he came close to a headstand position and moved the opening of the front pocket down. The blood was throbbing in his head and his forehead hurt. The case just wouldn't slip out. Pete wobbled his body, losing control of his balance and landing sideways on the hard floor with a crash. But given the outcome, the pain that pervaded him was bearable—the case had fallen out! But it took quite a while until Pete had put himself in the position to grab the case with his hands.

Escovedo had still not appeared and the Second Investigator wondered if he was still around. Pete fingered out a sharp piece of metal and used it to work on the tape. After several torturous minutes, he finally did it—the tape tore and Pete sat up. For the feet, it was done in

seconds. Despite the pain in his legs, Pete jumped up immediately. He finally wanted to know where he was.

Pete took a look through one window—water! Nothing but water! And opposite side? Water again. Did it mean that Escovedo set him off to the open sea?

In a single bound, Pete was at the cabin door. It was unlocked. Pete got out, breathed the fresh sea air and looked around. He was alone—in the middle of the sea. Far away, in the haze, he could see the shores of Los Angeles. Further southeast was a dark stripe—probably Catalina Island. The boat lay crosswise in the wind, which drove it slowly but steadily south, to where nothing existed but the open sea!

Pete felt panic shoot up inside him. If the boat was disabled, it was over. Then he would drift off down to South America for days, weeks, perhaps never to be found. Some time ago, he had read a report in the newspaper describing how a man in a drifting sail-boat had been saved by chance. He had only survived the week-long journey because he had collected rainwater in a plastic sheet and the pantry of his boat had been filled with food.

The engine of Miss Caballero's boat could only be started with a special key, which Pete of course did not have. Besides, Escovedo had done a good job—several cables were hanging out of the broken wooden cover, and in some cases, the glass had been broken. A key would not have helped anyway.

The radio, it shot through Pete's head. Maybe he could get help. The radio was inside the cabin and Pete slipped through the narrow door again. Not surprisingly, a violent blow had finished off the device.

Desperately Pete climbed back outside and looked around. Far and wide, there were no vessels in sight that he could have drawn attention to. He could only hope for a coincidence, otherwise he would drift across the sea for the rest of his days and nights.

Nights? The thought of the coming night gave him the next fright. If the lights on the boat did not work, he could not be seen in the dark or even in the fog by other vessels. In this area, huge cargo ships and tankers headed for the big international port of Long Beach. A collision would sink the boat within seconds without anyone aboard the tanker noticing.

Desperately, Pete searched for the switches and pressed it—no power, no lights. The miracle did not happen. When he had better control of himself after a few long minutes, Pete searched the boat for objects that could ensure his survival. Pete found several plastic bags to collect rainwater, and in the fridge, Miss Caballero had stored two juice boxes in addition to some food.

Pete also found the writing pad and his pen. This reminded him again of the message he wanted to write to Jupiter and Bob. But where had the note gone? He searched his pockets, but to no avail.

"My hiding place," Pete thought and looked in the small cupboard where Escovedo had surprised him. There was no note. Not even on the floor of the cabin. With a shrug of the shoulders, Pete went back on deck and began to write down everything that had happened for Jupiter and Bob.

"Perhaps I should call it my will," he thought, in a flash of humour. If he could no longer tell his story to Jupiter and Bob himself because all they found was the boat washed up on a deserted South American beach—empty!

Nevertheless, Pete calmed himself down by writing. It helped him to cope with his situation. He honestly hoped that Jupiter and Bob would come looking for him. But how could they know that he was drifting out to the open sea? He felt that he had been extremely stupid to go into the boat again because of the painting.

Pete concentrated so much on writing down his thoughts that he only noticed another vessel when it was already very close. A large speedboat passed him on the northern side. Pete jumped up. There were three people standing at the railing, small as dots, looking over at him.

“Help,” Pete yelled with all his might. But the boat did not change direction. It was out of earshot.

Pete tore off his T-shirt and swung it desperately through the air. The people on the other boat waved back with a cloth. They understood Pete’s gesture as a fresh greeting on the high seas. Then the boat had sailed past. Dejected, Pete pulled his T-shirt over his head.

“I’m a huge idiot,” he murmured. “I could have at least tried a distress signal—SOS or something—three short, three long, three short hoisting of the shirt.”

But the chance was missed, and whether Pete would ever get a second one was uncertain.

11. Who is Telling the Truth?

To get to Paddy O'Rien's house, Jupiter and Bob only needed to drive along a few curves of the small mountain road. Soon they had reached the ridge of the mountain on the side of the canyon. From there, they went straight on for a few minutes until Jupiter saw the house that Mr Horowitz had described to them in detail.

The house was much more colourful than he had imagined. Seemingly for no reason, large curves were built into the walls. They gave the building the impression that it had been invaded by the bubonic plague, or to put it in a kinder way, as if the dream of a colourful children's birthday party with balloons had manifested itself on this house.

Bob turned onto a driveway and after a short, somewhat bumpy ride, he stopped his Beetle right in front of the entrance door. They got out.

"The house matches your car," Juve remarked with a glance at the curves of the Beetle.

Bob took this as a compliment and went in search of the door bell. But before he found it, the door opened.

An old woman threw a prudent glance out. "What are you doing here? If you are here to give me trouble, I can only warn you! One false move and I'll blow your brains out with my shotgun!"

The First Investigator took heart. "You can save your lead, lady. We are Jupiter Jones and Bob Andrews. We live down in Rocky Beach. I'm Titus Jones's nephew and I just have a few questions for you. May we come in?"

When the name of Titus Jones was mentioned, the doorway became wider. "Come in," said Mrs O'Rien. "I think I've seen you before. Aren't you the boy whose parents died in an accident? It must have been terrible for you!"

Jupiter nodded. In Rocky Beach, word got around.

They went in and saw that Mrs O'Rien had indeed been holding a gun.

"It's not loaded," the woman said and put the gun in an umbrella stand.

The detectives looked around. The interior of the house was also very colourful and it had very eye-catching furniture to match the colour scheme. Jupiter thought it was very unusual for a simple sailor.

Mrs O'Rien commented on the boys' surprised looks, not without pride, saying: "The house was designed by a famous architect. It's so unique that even TV stations came here to film it."

She led the boys into the kitchen, where she had apparently just been preparing an early dinner. Bob looked at the clock and swallowed. It was so late that it would be dark in just over two hours. They sat down and were offered drinks.

"Ma'am, you live here alone?" Jupiter opened the conversation.

Mrs O'Rien nodded. "My husband died a couple of years ago. But look at me—I'm still very fit for my age! I'm going to stay here until I drop!"

The way she looked, they believed every word she said. "After all, you live on an unusually beautiful property in an unusually beautiful house," replied Jupiter, slowly returning to the subject.

“That was a stroke of luck. Paddy had won the lottery and not drunk up his money like the men from Ireland usually prefer. He put everything into the house and from then on, he only cared about what was most important to him.”

“Painting?” Jupe asked.

Mrs O’Rien looked at the First Investigator with surprise. “How did you know that?”

“We have seen some paintings by him. He painted the yachts he used to sail on as a sailor—*Samuel, Samantha and Gwendolyn.*”

The effect of this statement was more surprising than Jupiter had suspected. Mrs O’Rien got the answer stuck in her throat. She collapsed. All her energy, which had impressed the boys so much a moment ago, seemed to have left her suddenly.

“I don’t know those paintings,” she said softly. “Where did you see them?”

“Some time ago, my uncle had them in his salvage yard.”

“And were they definitely from Paddy? Did you see his signature?” the old woman asked.

Jupiter was forced to avoid this question. “We have not been able to examine the three paintings so closely, ma’am, but who else could have painted them? Your husband knew the three yachts by sight and he was a painter. If you could show us some of his paintings, we’ll be able to judge better.”

“We can compare painting styles,” Bob added. “Maybe the paintings were not done by your husband. Then there’s no need for any further discussion.”

Mrs O’Rien moaned and got up. “All right. I don’t know why you are interested in those paintings, but follow me to his studio. We have to go upstairs. I haven’t been up there for a long time. I took out all the paintings I liked and hung them up around the house.” She pointed in passing to a fruit painting hanging in the kitchen.

On the way up, they also came across one or two other paintings. Jupiter and Bob stopped to check. O’Rien had not been a great artist but he had a fine brush stroke. The more they saw, the less the kitschy islands with swimming women fitted into the idea they had of the painter. Had he deliberately misrepresented himself in the three paintings? Or was he not the creator of the works at all? Jupe began to doubt his assumption.

They passed the mezzanine floor where a door only half ajar. Jupiter took a quick look into the room which happened to be Mrs O’Rien’s bedroom. On her dresser sat a teddy bear dressed in old clothes.

“A beautiful bear,” Jupiter said, to skip the moment. “I know a bit about old toys. In my uncle’s salvage—”

Mrs O’Rien seemed embarrassed by their look into her bedroom and she pulled the door shut. “It was a memento. The bear is from my childhood,” Mrs O’Rien said gruffly and pointed to the stairs. “Here you go!”

When they reached upstairs, Mrs O’Rien unlocked the door to the studio. Carefully they entered a large room, which was illuminated red by the low sun through the dome-like glazing of the roof. Apart from the dust that covered everything, it seemed as if Paddy O’Rien had only just left the studio.

“May I ask how your husband died,” Jupiter asked carefully.

“He died of a heart attack—without warning, out of the blue. It happened here in the studio. I was dusting when he called me. I immediately called the doctor, but it was already too late!”

“You don’t have to stay with us if you’re uncomfortable,” Bob said compassionately. “Let us just look at the paintings and then we’ll come down again.”

"Yes, yes, I can. It was some time ago and I've got over it. Just look around you," Mrs O'Rien replied. Slowly her face began to regain colour.

The two detectives nodded and walked towards an easel with an unfinished painting on it. O'Rien's house was on it. In a folder leaning against an old wooden chair next to the easel, they discovered several preliminary sketches for the painting he had begun. Then Jupiter and Bob checked the other folders and stands in which O'Rien had kept most of his artwork. They discovered sea scenes, sunsets, harbours and ships and now and then a portrait of his wife. But they didn't find a single painting featuring *Samuel*, *Samantha* or *Gwendolyn*. That was more than unusual.

"Mrs O'Rien, from what we can see, your husband would do several sketches of a painting before starting. If so, we should come across sketches of the three yachts."

"That's right. But I've never seen any sketches of yachts. And Paddy always kept his work here in his studio. Perhaps you are mistaken in your supposition."

"It looks like it," Jupiter said. A slight disillusionment resonated in his voice. He had to admit that O'Rien's paintings were much less kitschy than the background he had seen in Reynolds' painting.

"Anyway, that should be enough," Jupiter finally said. They turned to leave.

When they were back on the ground floor, Bob noticed several old photos and documents hanging on the wall above an old work table.

"May I take a look at the photos?" he asked, and on a nod, he went closer. Between several photos, he discovered an old certificate. "Elizabeth Elliott, is that you?"

"Yes. Elliott was my name before I married Paddy O'Rien."

"Hey, you were a good cook," Bob remarked. "You passed with distinction!"

"I still am!"

"Of course you are," Bob said. "Excuse me."

His gaze wandered on. Next to the certificate hung a black-and-white photo showing a young woman wearing a kitchen apron. Beside her, a perfectly dressed gentleman beamed into the camera.

"Jeff Rothman," Mrs O'Rien said.

"The oil baron? You worked in his house?" It was as if lightning had struck Jupiter.

"Yes, I was a cook and maid in his house—at least for a few years. Then I went back to my mother's for some time. I met Paddy at the Rothmans. He was sailing on one of his yachts."

"And you married Paddy then?" Jupiter asked.

"No, that was much later, after Rothman had died."

"Then you must know something about the demise of *Gwendolyn*," Jupiter said excitedly.

"The accident?" Mrs O'Rien stared at him. "How do you know that old story?"

"We went to see Mr Horowitz, Mrs O'Rien," Jupe explained. "He told us about it. He had one of the paintings we are looking for!"

"So, once again old Horowitz couldn't keep his mouth shut. He wasn't even there!"

"And... you?"

"No! I was living with my mother then!"

"Paddy?"

"Neither!"

"No?" Jupe remarked. "But, Mr Horowitz claimed that Paddy—"

"My husband was brought ashore at the last minute. Samuel and another sailor were on board. The yacht got caught in a storm and sank. They managed to save themselves. There's nothing more to tell about it. Please leave me alone now. I'd like to lie down for a while."

Jupiter nodded thoughtfully and went to the exit. “Yes, Mrs O’Rien. We are sorry. We will leave now but we may have to come back again.”

“Please spare me that,” Elizabeth O’Rien said and closed the door energetically.

12. A Tip from Rubbish-George

During the return journey, the two detectives remained silent. Bob had enough to do to steer his Beetle through the steep curves and Jupiter was deep in his thoughts. Although Bob did his best, it took them almost three quarters of an hour to reach Rocky Beach Harbour. The sun had just set and night fell.

"I hope we're not too late," muttered Bob as they turned into the car park. They left the car in a hurry and ran off. Even before they reached the berth, the boys saw that Miss Caballero's boat was gone.

"What is the meaning of this, Jupe?" Bob asked.

"Either something came up or Pete went after it by boat."

"What do you mean 'something came up'?" Bob asked cautiously.

Jupe did not answer immediately. He was gripped by a bad conscience. After all, it was he who had indirectly persuaded Pete to follow Escovedo. "I hope nothing bad happened to him."

"I suggest you inform the police," Bob said.

Jupiter nodded. "But first we will examine the berth. Maybe we'll find a clue of some kind."

As the lighting on the pier was not sufficient, Jupiter pulled his flashlight out of his pocket. Slowly he shone the light plank by plank. Bob also wanted to make himself useful, and he turned to the rings that were attached to the pier to which the boats were tied. A few metres away, he came upon a wooden pole.

"Jupe, there's a note!" he exclaimed. "Here, by the post."

Jupiter let go of the planks and hurried to him. Bob pointed to a narrow piece of paper that had been folded up once and attached to a slot in the wood. It had their names written on it in capital letters. The First Investigator gave Bob the flashlight. Then he carefully removed the paper and unfolded it. Bob shone the flashlight at it. It said:

Hi Jupe & Bob,

I'm done here and will get back to you soon.—P.

"There you go," cried Bob with relief. "This should allay our worst fears. Escovedo probably left in a boat!"

Jupiter looked at the note over and over again. Something was bothering him. His hand went over the edge. The paper was torn off at the bottom. Jupiter turned it over to the side where his name was written. It was written with the same pen as the text. So that wasn't the reason for his irritation.

Once again, Jupiter skimmed over the text. The handwriting was undoubtedly Pete's. Jupiter could distinguish it from any other handwriting in the world. That Pete had not signed with his full name could be explained by the time pressure. Jupiter read the message again and again. He simply did not come up with the solution.

"What's bothering you?" asked Bob who noticed Jupiter's doubts. "Was it that Pete didn't write more? Well, I suppose that he was in a hurry!"

"Yes, that can be explained."

Bob urged Jupe to leave. He wanted to inform Inspector Cotta and Jupiter decided to postpone his little problem until later. They hurriedly headed towards the car park. Bob's eyes searched for the nearest phone booth.

From outside, a stately motorboat chugged in. Jupiter noticed it only marginally. He looked around searching for whether he could find someone who might have seen something but only a few scattered passers-by strolled by.

A little off the harbour basin where the park began, there was a dark figure sitting on a bench.

"Aha!" Jupe said and pointed to the person on the bench. "Maybe he saw something!"

When Jupiter and Bob came closer, they recognized the man. It was Rubbish-George, a well-known vagrant in Rocky Beach. He is often to be found on the beach promenade. When he was not scrounging off the passers-by, he goes through rubbish bins for food. Now he was about to settle himself nicely on the bench.

"Ah, The Three Investigators!" he greeted the two of them. "Only two of you... You're probably in trouble again. Can't I get some money from you?"

"I think it is the other way round," replied Jupiter without going into the mischievous undertone of the vagrant. "We are looking for Pete. He was in one of the boats here. Have you seen him?"

Rubbish-George shook his head and put a blanket over the bench. "I just got here. If you want to do me a favour, get me a beer. I'm going to dine now!"

Without paying further attention to the detectives, he pulled a crumpled newspaper from his backpack, laid it on the blanket and carefully smoothed it out to place his cold hamburger on top.

"The few wrinkles more or less wouldn't have mattered to me," said Bob with a grin.

"Boy, I'm not like you people. I've got all the time in the world."

"All the time in the world..." Jupiter muttered the last words of the vagrant. Suddenly he knew what had bothered him about the note that Pete had allegedly left. He pulled it out of his pocket and looked at it again. The lower side was rough.

On the one hand, Pete had been in such a hurry that he had only signed with a 'P'. Nevertheless, he must have taken the time to carefully tear down the much too large sheet of paper right at the end of his message. This was completely illogical. Something was not right. It was indeed Pete's handwriting but anyone could have written the 'P' underneath. It could very well be that another person had torn off the note at this very spot to remove the rest of the message.

"I fear Pete is in great danger," Jupiter said. "George, did you notice anything suspicious?"

"Rubbish-George always notices something strange," he said slowly. "For instance, Mrs Pearson's motorboat just docked here. You see? The lights are still on."

"The lawyer's boat?" Bob asked. "Why should that be strange?"

Rubbish-George pointed to a car that stopped at the side of the road and from which a woman got out. "Mrs Pearson has just parked her luxury car over there. She can't possibly be tying up the boat at the same time."

"Maybe her husband is in the boat," Bob said, shrugging his shoulders.

"I begged him for a few dollars when he left for the airport earlier," Rubbish-George explained. "Unfortunately, he didn't give me anything!"

Jupiter frowned. No one got out of Mrs Pearson's boat. The lawyer, whose car was simply parked in a no-parking zone, hurriedly walked towards the pier where her boat had just docked.

“Let’s go and see what’s going on there,” said Jupiter. “Come on, Bob! We’ll call the inspector later!”

“What do I get for my tip,” whined Rubbish-George.

“If we find Pete through this, we will invite you for ice cream,” Jupiter said and the two detectives ran off.

Shaking his head, Rubbish-George grabbed the hamburger that was waiting for him on top of a *Los Angeles Times* headline and took a hearty bite. Then he pulled a can of beer from the inside pocket of his jacket. He opened it, took a sip and moistened his index finger with the mixture of spit and beer. He held his finger in the air to check.

It was true—the wind had changed.

Jupiter had many worries. Pete had disappeared and while he and Bob were running towards the pier where Mrs Pearson’s boat was moored, a new thought suddenly came to his mind.

“Escovedo was waiting for us in front of the lawyer’s office,” Jupiter said. “That’s what we thought. But maybe that guy wasn’t watching us. It’s possible that all he really wanted was to meet Mrs Pearson.”

Bob looked at him in surprise. “Escovedo and Mrs Pearson? But why?”

“I can’t give you an answer to that yet. Maybe the lawyer’s hiding something.”

They now approached the boat and slowed down. There was no one else on the pier. In one of the other moored boats, the lights were on, otherwise everything was dark. Softly, the waves sloshed against the boats.

There was no sign of Mrs Pearson. Apparently she was on her boat, inside of which a lamp was also lit. Carefully, the two detectives crept closer. It was an impressive motorboat the Pearsons had afforded themselves—longer and wider than most. The two boys had often dreamed of such a boat.

They bent down to look through one of the portholes. Mrs Pearson was standing in the galley below the stern deck. She gestured and spoke, though they couldn’t quite make out what she said. So there must be someone else on board.

But no matter how hard the two detectives tried, they could not see the second person. The boat was moored backwards. A narrow wooden walkway connected the deck to the pier.

“Let’s go on board,” Jupiter hissed. “Perhaps there we can hear what the conversation is about.”

Bob looked at his friend, whose body weight was impressive. “The boat will rock conspicuously when you step on it,” he said.

Jupiter understood what he meant. “Then you go alone.”

Bob nodded. Carefully, he set one foot on the wooden walkway and crept over. Gently he stepped onto the deck. The boat hardly reacted. In front of it was a staircase leading to the lower level of the boat. Bob turned to Jupiter and made eye contact. Jupiter nodded at him.

Bob went down the stairs. Below was a door that had to lead into the saloon, which, as they had seen from the outside, was directly under the bow. He could probably open it safely. Carefully, he pushed down the handle and opened the door. A warm light welcomed him. The furniture there was so exquisite that many people would never even have in their homes.

Bob’s gaze fell on the object that was carelessly leaning against one of the bar stools. It was the painting from Anita Caballero’s boat—the white yacht *Gwendolyn*!

For a moment, he toyed with the idea of grabbing the painting and run off. But it was clear to Bob that saving Pete was more important than anything else right now, and it was obvious that something had happened to him. He stepped inside and pulled the door shut

behind him. On the left-hand side was a door leading to the galley. It was only ajar. Bob recognized the voice of the lawyer who was speaking.

“... You know, it’s just a matter of a few more hours. Nobody’s supposed to show up until midnight tonight—especially those three rascals. Nor that woman as well! That would jeopardize everything.”

A man answered something. It spoke softly, but Bob thought he could tell that it was Escovedo. Then he was the one who steered the boat into the harbour.

“I hope you heard me right!” Now it was Mrs Pearson again. “I want everybody out of the way—just for a few more hours! I don’t want any more trouble this close to the finish line.”

Bob pricked up his ears. Was it about Pete?

“You can count on it, Mrs Pearson! That boy will come back all right... and Mr Horowitz...”

“Who’s Mr Horowitz?” Mrs Pearson asked.

“I told you he’s the one where I got the painting of the red yacht from. He’s fine. I just needed to lock him up a little, yes. I’ll let him go tomorrow.”

Bob swallowed. Sure, the old man was fine now... but only because he and Jupiter had freed him.

“And the lady?”

“I can’t get to her. But I think she’s busy... and she has no idea. I also took her painting of the white yacht, yes.”

“That was good! Where is it, anyway?”

“Next door!”

Bob winced. Hopefully it didn’t occur to them to look at the painting now else he had to get out quickly. But Mrs Pearson kept talking.

“That leaves the two boys. But even they don’t know what it’s all about. It shouldn’t be hard for you to keep them in check past midnight.”

“Unfortunately, I don’t know where they are. Nor can I be everywhere... and I hope my assignment is soon over, yes. I want to go back to the ship. And also, my money, ma’am.”

“Relax, Will! You’ll get your money when it’s all over. Then you go to Long Beach on your freighter and disappear for a few weeks. But you still need to be around for tonight. There’s a meeting at my father’s house at 10 pm in honour of my grandfather, like every year. I need you there in case something undesirable turns up. You can look around outside. I don’t trust those detectives. You’ll get your money tomorrow morning and then you can leave.”

“Until you have another job for me?”

“Of course. Let’s go. We’re taking the painting with us.”

Suddenly everything happened very fast. Steps could be heard.

Bob had not expected this surprising turn of events. He didn’t think about it for long—he crept to the bar stool, grabbed the painting and was about to turn around to flee when Escovedo was already standing in the doorway. “You rascal!”

Bob held the painting in front of him like a shield. Step by step, he groped his way sideways towards the exit. Now Mrs Pearson appeared in the saloon. “Will! Do something!”

“Block the exit, ma’am!”

Mrs Pearson went over to the exit. “Were you listening in?” she asked.

“N... no. I just wanted to get Miss Caballero’s painting...”

“Give me the painting and you may go,” said Mrs Pearson with a false warmth in her voice. “Be a good boy. Put it over there by the bar and I’ll let you out. You’ll be all right!”

Escovedo waited reluctantly. Bob didn't believe a word Mrs Pearson said. But he noticed something the lawyer couldn't see because her back was to the glass door. Jupiter had been watching what was going on.

The boat swayed slightly when he stepped on the deck, but at that moment no one was paying attention.

"Mrs Pearson," Bob said to buy time, "what you're saying sounds reasonable, but I want you to keep that violent man away from me."

Mrs Pearson glanced across to Escovedo and back to Bob. "Well, give me the painting then!"

Bob resigned. At that moment, the glass door flew open and hit Mrs Pearson in the back. She screamed. Bob let the painting slide down and grabbed a bar stool. But Escovedo was faster than he thought.

With one leap, he had jumped at Bob and thrown him to the ground. Jupiter charged at Escovedo, but Mrs Pearson managed to give him a kick in the side with her pointed shoes. Escovedo pinned Bob to the floor. Jupiter still managed to throw himself on the man with all his might. Unfortunately Bob, who was at the very bottom, almost lost his breath. Escovedo was distracted for a short moment and somehow Bob was able to wriggle out of his position.

Meanwhile Mrs Pearson had grabbed the painting and was looking for an object at the bar that she could use as a weapon. The tide seemed to turn against the boys.

"Let's get out of here," cried Bob.

Jupiter let go of Escovedo, just in time, because the man had suddenly pulled out a knife. The detectives ran up to the deck. Escovedo followed them. Almost simultaneously, they reached the narrow wooden walkway that led from the boat to the pier.

At that moment, Bob felt a sharp blow from behind. He staggered towards Jupiter, who also lost his balance. Desperately they clung together. The boat swayed as they slipped and fell into the water.

The water was cold and black and salty. When they resurfaced, Escovedo waved his knife angrily and expectantly.

"Dive!" Jupiter ordered.

13. Shipwreck

Pete blinked into the last rays of the setting sun. Now it would quickly become night—dark and cold. No other vessel had passed his boat since the encounter with the speedboat.

During the last hours, he had been writing his message to Jupiter and Bob, but had repeatedly interrupted his writing to reflect on his rescue. He had wisely not given in to the sudden and panicky urge to simply jump into the sea and swim towards Los Angeles. He would never have got there. If he had not died of hypothermia, he would have died of exhaustion.

In the open air in the middle of the front deck of the boat, Pete had set up a cut-up plastic bag with the corners tied to the boat's railing so that they formed a slope upwards from the middle. This makeshift construction was waiting for rainwater but only a few light, white clouds brushed the sky. For the time being, his drink supply was sufficient.

When the last ray of sunlight had flashed and disappeared, Pete moved to the other side of the boat. He had still not quite drifted past Catalina Island. This surprised him. Like a dark strip, it had pushed itself in front of the direction of the sky from which the night was approaching. It even seemed as if he had come closer to Catalina.

Maybe he could at least swim to the coast of the island? But the distance seemed mighty far. Besides, there were unpredictable ocean currents.

Pete knew the island. It was a small jewel, especially Avalon, the only city there. Its name alone was enough to make anyone dream. His friend Kelly had often mentioned that she wanted to spend her honeymoon there. Whenever she said that, Pete would change the subject instantly. Yes, Kelly. He had also written her a letter, but unlike the lines to Jupiter and Bob, he had sealed it securely in an envelope. His friends shouldn't read how he apologized to her for his harsh reactions lately. Now he would have loved to take her in his arms. Yeah, he would have even taken her to Catalina Island...

The letter to his parents he had planned for the next day, if he should ever live to see it.

With goose bumps on his back, Pete thought of the super freighters that would cross the path of his little boat.

On one of the mountain slopes of Catalina Island, a light suddenly came on. It was the lonely, uninhabited part of the island, which consisted mainly of low brushwood and rock. In the lowlands, there was a camp ground, where Pete had been before with a youth camp. Also up there, someone camped—a person who wanted to enjoy the loneliness and who did not suspect that a short distance away, Pete feared for his life.

Pete averted his gaze and watched the water whose waves gently pushed his disoriented boat onward. A light wind was still blowing.

And suddenly he noticed something. The change had come so slowly, so imperceptibly, that he had not anticipated it earlier—the wind had turned! If Pete had been drifted diagonally into the open sea before, it now seemed as if he was moving towards Catalina Island!

Hope returned to him. Pete tried to trace the path of the boat in his mind. If he was lucky and there was no current, he would reach the southern end of the island, which was still visible against the evening sky. But incessantly, it became darker. The island became harder and harder to make out. The moon was nowhere to be seen and the faint light of the stars

would not be enough to separate the black of the sea, the black of the land and the black of the sky. He had to wait and hope.

After half an hour, it was so dark that Pete almost despaired. But in the meantime, he could hear clearly how the waves hit the rocks in the distance. His boat was still on course.

Then finally the moon rose. After only a few minutes, the light was enough that Pete could see the outline of the island. He was already very close, but it was closer than he thought. Apparently, the sea pushed past the island in a powerful current.

Pete decided to jump into the dark water and swim if necessary. All he had to do was wait for the right moment. The noise of the crashing waves became louder. The boat was heading for rocky outcrops. The waves rolled in deep from the Pacific Ocean and seemed so soft on the sea, but unfolded their full force on the rocks. If he decided to swim, there was a great danger that the waves would simply crush him. He decided to stay on the safe boat for now.

The coast came closer. Pete was waiting. Soon it seemed within his grasp. Suddenly, a tremor came through the boat. Pete was thrown to the floor.

The boat turned and kept spinning. Water was coming out from between the wooden slats. The rocks! The boat had hit the rocks! There was another bang. The boat tipped over to one side. The spray of the opposing waves splashed in Pete's face. Helplessly he slipped over the planks and thundered onto the opposite railing.

Suddenly, a wave grabbed him and threw him into the water by force. For an anxious moment, Pete was pulled into the depths. He paddled wildly back to the surface and took a deep breath. Behind him, he heard the boat crash into a rock. It splintered. Panicked, Pete crawled a few strokes in the opposite direction—always in fear of being thrown against a rock. This was a different sea than the sun-drenched blue water he knew from surfing and swimming during the day. This water was black, enormous, interspersed with white sprays.

Pete could not see what was lurking beneath the surface. In the adventure books Pete had read, getting stranded was always so easy. There was no talk of pointed rocks, instead a flat, white sandy beach waited for the shipwrecked man. Pete tried to calm himself down by swimming ahead and looking around.

After a few moments, he had decided on a landing place. Here the rocks seemed smaller and the shore flatter. Carefully Pete swam ahead. The sea played with him. Under no circumstances should he panic and get carried away. That would be the certain death. His foot struck something solid, but it didn't hurt.

Then Pete succeeded in exploiting the momentum of the current for himself. A few strong moves and he clung to a ledge that belonged to the island.

Pete rested for a moment. Several waves swept past. Then he pulled himself up. Breathing heavily, he stood up and looked at the hillside that awaited him.

Halfway up, he stopped and turned around. A few planks shone in the moonlight reflected on the sea, otherwise there was nothing more to see of the boat. It had sunk and with it the two letters he had written. But he, Pete, had been lucky. He was safe on land.

The wet, salty clothes stuck to him. Now Pete could feel that he was freezing. The moonlight helped him find a way through the underbrush. Beyond the hill, somewhere, there must be the small city of Avalon. Now, as never before, it had to be the city of his dreams. There he would find help, and Jupiter and Bob would know that he was all right. With new courage, Pete set out on his journey.

It lasted over an hour. Then finally Pete discovered a road that ran diagonally along the coast. He climbed down the slope and walked along the road. After a few minutes, a car approached. Pete tried to stop it. The car swerved and drove past him.

“With my sticky hair and wet clothes I must look like a madman,” it shot through Pete’s head.

He walked past a diving station where tourists could rent their equipment during the day. No one was there. Then, finally, after a bend, the warm lights of Avalon shone towards him.

Snorting and gasping for air, Bob came back to the surface. There was no trace of Jupiter. Fearful, Bob looked around. Had his friend gone in another direction after all? The sea was too dark for him to see much. They had dived under a motorboat to deceive Escovedo. And now Jupiter had disappeared. Bubbles rose next to Bob. There was no way that could have come from him. Bob took a breath and went into the water again.

Jupiter was right below him. Apparently, he got caught up in something. His movements were hectic. Bob swam deeper and got hold of an anchor rope. It was firmly caught around Jupiter’s legs. With all his strength, Bob pulled the rope in Jupiter’s direction so that it loosened a little. Jupiter seized the chance and slid out.

They showed up together.

“My goodness! That was close!” Jupe took a deep breath. “I owe you a debt of gratitude, Bob!”

Bob wanted to reply, but by then they already heard Escovedo’s unbearable voice: “Too bad you didn’t disappear completely!”

Escovedo stood on the pier and flashed his teeth in the dim light of the street lamp. He had seen everything. “You’re welcome to come ashore, boys.”

“Dive!” Jupiter ordered.

But at that very moment, Mrs Pearson appeared next to the man. “Forget the boys and let’s get out of here. They broke into our boat and we had to defend ourselves. No one will believe them!”

“Okay.”

A few moments later, the two detectives were alone. Carefully, Jupiter and Bob swam around a few boats. They didn’t want to get tangled in a rope again. Then they discovered a small ladder with the help of which even the weighty Jupiter could climb ashore fairly comfortably.

Mrs Pearson and her accomplice were nowhere to be found.

“Sometimes I could hate the Pacific,” Jupiter said, when he had safe ground under his feet again. He shook like a wet poodle. “At least I hope the effort was worth it.”

As they walked along the pier, Bob told Jupe what he had overheard. “Escovedo did something to Pete. He told Mrs Pearson that Pete would be released tomorrow, but we saw how Escovedo imagines such a thing in Mr Horowitz’s case. We must inform Inspector Cotta at once.”

Jupiter nodded. “Escovedo is tasked to take us out of the picture altogether. But why?”

“It’s related to the paintings. They’re up to something with them... and something’s going on tonight—apparently at midnight. They don’t seem to care about what happens tomorrow.”

“Hmm... Did they say where?”

“They are meeting at Mrs Pearson’s father’s house—wherever that is—at 10 pm.”

“Who her father is, we should be able to find out.”

“Well, it would be a Mr Pearson, wouldn’t it?”

“Pearson is her husband’s surname, Bob. So her father should have a different surname. We can always ask Aunt Mathilda. She might know such things.”

“A bad suggestion, Jupe! Before we get an answer from her, we’ll probably have to spend hours scrubbing the hallway.”

Jupiter smiled.

“Escovedo would be at the meeting tonight,” Bob continued. “And tomorrow he will leave for the port at Long Beach.”

“Long Beach? He may be part of the crew of one of the big ships that sail there,” Jupe remarked.

Bob nodded.

Jupiter thought for a moment. “Escovedo works for the lawyer. He does some dirty work for her. Then he disappears again at sea for several weeks and the police are left in the dark.”

“But how is it all connected, Jupe? And what is the secret of the paintings?”

In the meantime, they had come to the car park where Bob’s Beetle was. There was also a phone booth nearby. Jupiter dialled Cotta’s number.

The Inspector answered the phone immediately. He sounded angry, but he had news for Jupiter and Bob. “Pete has just called from a police station. You won’t believe where he is!”

“Where?” Jupe asked.

“Catalina Island! He drifted alone on a boat in the sea for hours in agony! But he is safe now!”

Jupiter and Bob moaned with joy. The Inspector continued: “It was this Escovedo who lured him into a trap. What kind of thing are you three up to? Can’t you just let the police do their job when things get dangerous?”

“And Pete’s okay?” Jupe ignored the inspector’s warning.

“Yes. He’s lucky! For the time being, he is in Avalon. But what about you two? You should go home now.”

Jupiter looked down at his sticky, half-wet clothes. His hair was sticking to his head like a cap. “We took a small bath, Inspector! And we still have a few things to work out but we really need your help! We’ll be in touch!”

“I hope so, in time! Oh, before I forget... there’s one more thing I have to tell you.”

“From Pete?”

“Right. Pete told me to tell you that the secret was under the island. Yes, he said: ‘under the island’. Can you make sense out of it?”

Bob, who had overheard the whole conversation, shook his head, but Jupiter nodded immediately. “I can, Inspector!”

“Anything else would have surprised me,” Cotta said and hung up.

14. The Trail Gets Hot

When Bob drove back to Headquarters, Jupiter was deep in thought. That Pete was saved relaxed the situation and gave him the opportunity to use the next hour to solve the puzzle of the paintings. Bob had obtained a decisive indication that tonight the mystery had to be solved as tomorrow would be too late. There was much to suggest that they would attend the meeting as well.

Jupiter had already put together a few pieces of the puzzle. He suspected more, but much remained in the dark. He and Bob had only little time left. Above all, they had to get to the paintings. Thanks to Pete's 'under the island' tip, he now knew how the paintings would reveal their secret... but he only had a vague idea of what the secret was.

"The key to everything is Mrs Pearson," he murmured. "She saw the painting Anita Caballero had at Booksmith, but she lied to make us believe that she hadn't seen it. That was the trigger for this entire case. That's where it all began."

Bob nodded, but he could not follow Jupiter mentally.

"The painter's wife, Mrs O'Rien, also lied about one thing," Jupiter explained. "But I can check that right now. I just want to know why."

"You mean, when it came to her husband's death?" Bob asked.

Jupiter shook his head. "I was thinking about something else. But you have just brought out something interesting—about the painter's death... I still have some thoughts..."

By now they had reached the entrance to the salvage yard. Jupiter got out to push the gate open and Bob drove his Beetle in.

Then Juve instructed Bob to go to Headquarters and find out who Mrs Pearson's father was and where he lived. He himself went into his house to get the same information from Aunt Mathilda, and above all, to browse an auction catalogue of old collectables in Uncle Titus's book shelf.

Mathilda and Titus sat in front of the much-too-loud TV and were bored. They were all the more pleased when they saw Jupiter.

"Good evening, Juve! Sit down and join us," Titus said.

"What's going on, Uncle Titus?"

"Some kind of quiz show," Titus said. "Can you imagine, Juve, we sold the grill earlier! For a great price!"

"Great work," Juve remarked. "Uncle Titus, may I see your auction catalogue for collectables? And I have a question for you, Aunt Mathilda. Have you heard of a lawyer by the name of Regina Pearson of the law firm Pearson & Pearson?"

"I don't know her personally, but I believe I have heard of her before," Aunt Mathilda said. "Why?"

"Do you know who her father is?"

"Say, do you want to be a quiz master?" Aunt Mathilda said. "I have no idea who her father is. I've often noticed you think that I'm the biggest gossip in town."

"And you are the second largest," Uncle Titus remarked dryly and laughed. "Wait, Juve, I'll get you the catalogue. What is it about?"

"About bears... Stuffed bears."

“Stuffed bears?” When Titus disappeared into the next room shaking his head, Aunt Mathilda finally turned down the sound of the TV but only because she had both a hunch and a worry. “Tell me you’re not involved in some dangerous case again?”

“It’s as good as solved,” replied Jupiter in a tone that had been trained for years and which tolerated no doubts. “You don’t have to give it a thought!”

“And am I really that big a gossip, Jupe?”

“Not that I know of... but one should always be well-informed.”

Satisfied with this answer, Mathilda Jones turned back to the television and turned up the sound. “You should wash your hair, Jupe.”

Jupiter moaned inwardly. “It’s the salt water, Aunt. We were swimming earlier.”

With relief, he saw Uncle Titus coming back with a thick book under his arm. Jupiter took the book and decided to retire to the kitchen. There he opened the refrigerator, decided on a yoghurt dessert, sat down at the kitchen table and opened the book.

After a few minutes of flipping pages, he found what he was looking for. He slammed the book shut powerfully, quickly scraped out the yoghurt cup and left the house quietly.

On the way back to Headquarters, he glanced across the salvage yard, which lay there quietly in the faint glow of a street lamp. As he entered the trailer, Bob had just put down the telephone. His face showed that he had been successful.

“So, who is Mrs Regina Pearson’s father?”

Smiling meaningfully, Bob gave Jupiter a piece of paper. “Finding the address cost me several phone calls, but it wasn’t hard to get the name. I simply called Mrs Pearson’s secretary—the one who had greeted us so sceptically at the office. I remembered her name. I told her I had an urgent gift for Mrs Pearson’s father and he would certainly be upset if she didn’t give me his phone number right away. She turned me down coolly, but she gave me his name...”

Jupiter took a look at the sheet of paper and grinned. “Just as I thought! Nice work, Bob. Let’s get on with it!”

“Shouldn’t we tell Cotta?”

“We will, Bob, but first I have to clear up a few things. We will also be consulting Chief Reynolds and Miss Caballero. I want them all to get together and find out what’s behind the secret of the paintings.”

“That sounds like the great Jupiter Jones show,” Bob said somewhat sarcastically.

Jupiter closed the door to the trailer and laughed. “That’s what gives it that extra something!”

They got into the Beetle.

“So where are we going,” Bob asked.

“Back to the canyon,” Jupiter said. “We’re going to see Mrs O’Rien again.”

“I won’t be long,” Jupiter said when they had reached their destination. Before Bob could even reply, Jupe had already jumped out of the car. He wanted to go to the older lady alone, mainly because he assumed that this way he would be able to get her to say more. He sensed that she liked him and he could guess why.

Jupiter pressed the door bell and a short while later, the light came on in the corridor. The door was ripped open and Jupiter looked into the muzzle tubes of Mrs O’Rien’s shotgun.

“This time it’s loaded,” said Mrs O’Rien sharply.

“It is very important,” said Jupiter. “Please let me in, Mrs O’Rien!”

“Leave me alone,” cried the woman. “I don’t want to hear any more of those old stories!”

“But you should,” Jupiter replied and put his foot in the gap of the door. “I have important news for you. Only that there is not enough time to explain everything now! And please help me to clear up an old story! I assure you, you will be grateful.”

Slowly, Mrs O’Rien lowered her gun. “Alright, come in,” she said faintly. “What do you want?”

“I need to go to your husband’s studio again.”

She nodded and closed the door. Together they climbed the stairs, step by step as if they had done it a thousand times before.

“Do you think about your parents often?” Mrs O’Rien asked as they passed the mezzanine floor.

“Sometimes.”

“How exactly do you remember them?”

“I was very small. It’s just a few images that have stayed with me.”

“They must have loved you.”

“I know,” Jupiter said softly. Then they remained silent.

Moments later, they had arrived at the upper floor. Mrs O’Rien opened the door to the studio, turned on the light and they entered.

“And now what?” she asked.

With some effort, Jupiter called himself back into the present situation. “It’s about your husband’s death,” he said calmly. “Please remember exactly. You said you were with him that day he died. What were you doing?”

“I was dusting and cleaning this place.”

“Where exactly were you?”

Mrs O’Rien pointed to a gallery that ran along the wall just below the glass roof. “Up there!”

“Let’s go up together,” Jupiter urged.

“I haven’t been on the gallery since my husband died. But if it helps...”

To get to the gallery, they had to climb a narrow wooden staircase. Mrs O’Rien moaned, but she bravely climbed up.

“Where was your exact position?” Jupe asked.

The woman pointed forward. “A little further.”

The gallery was very narrow, so they had to go one behind the other. Jupiter noticed the colourful tiles that were attached to the wall.

Mrs O’Rien stopped and said: “This is where I was standing.”

“Could you describe to me exactly what happened here?” Jupiter urged.

She took it one step further. “I was just cleaning the tiles. Suddenly Paddy yelled out to me to help him with something. I said something like: ‘I’ll be right down, Paddy, just finishing up the cleaning.’” She pointed to a tile with a starfish pattern on it. “I remember this starfish tile.”

“This one?” Jupiter gently pushed Mrs O’Rien aside and bent over. Carefully, he pushed the sides of the tile. When nothing happened, he pushed on the sides of the neighbouring tiles one by one. Suddenly, there was a crunching sound and one tile gave way. In surprise, Mrs O’Rien took a step back. Jupe then removed the tile from the wall.

“Paddy was afraid that you would discover his hiding place,” Jupiter said softly. “That was probably why he called you to come down and the fright led to his heart failure. Don’t blame yourself for that. You couldn’t have known... and he must have had a very bad heart condition. The tile was probably the trigger. If it wasn’t, something else could have happened.”

Jupiter looked into the dark opening and hesitated. “Are you brave enough for the truth, Mrs O’Rien?”

Mrs O’Rien resigned and nodded without a word. So Jupiter reached into the hole. It had to be one of those colourful dents on the house wall that allowed a secret hiding place in the wall. His fingers got hold of a roll of strong but pliable material. Carefully he pulled it out.

He took out the tape that held the roll together. Like a spring, the roll sprang open and released several sheets.

“*Samuel, Samantha* and... *Gwendolyn*,” Jupiter said as he pulled the sheets apart. “These are the sketches your husband made before he painted the three yachts! They already look very much like the later works—with one important difference!”

Jupiter bent down and put the sketches in a certain order. He took a step back and looked at Mrs O’Rien with a mixture of expectation and compassion. It didn’t take Mrs O’Rien long to understand.

Involuntarily, she moved backwards and put her hand to her neck. “No, no, no...” It was an incredulous stammering that slowly dried up. “Gwendolyn?”

“Come with me,” Jupiter said and carefully took the old woman by the arm. “We should settle this matter once and for all... We are now going to meet an old acquaintance! Or should I say... an old enemy?”

15. No Admittance!

Before he left, Jupiter made two more phone calls. First, he called Inspector Cotta and asked him to leave now. Second, Jupiter dialled Chief Reynolds's number. Only after the phone had rung for a long time was it picked up.

"Reynolds here..." The chief sounded slightly tipsy. Music was playing in the background.

"Jupiter Jones, Mr Reynolds. The search for your painting is entering a crucial phase!"

"I am impressed, Jupiter." The music volume was turned down.

"I'd like you to join me in solving this case. Are you free tonight, Mr Reynolds? It is important."

"I'm sitting on my terrace right now with Miss Caballero. We're having a lovely conversation... but if it's urgent—"

"It is... Please bring Miss Caballero along with you, Chief. After all, she is also the owner of one of the three paintings and hers was also stolen," Jupe said. "By the way, could you help Miss Caballero in her search for the inscription on her pendant?"

"Sadly no, not this late at night, but I might try to make some enquiries tomorrow. But tell me, Jupiter, where shall we go?"

Jupiter gave the address. "Ask for Mr Rothman at the gate."

"Samuel Rothman, the son of the oil baron?"

"That's who he is. Do you know him personally?"

"Of course! I had to sort out a burglary case for him... and that was just before my retirement."

"Have the police been able to arrest the burglar?"

"Not that I know of, but some of the stolen items turned up later."

"I see. Were any paintings stolen at that time? Paintings with yachts, for example?"

"No, Jupiter, I could remember that. It was about his Mercedes collection. He owned several valuable cars. They broke into his garage and helped themselves to the car parts."

"Thank you, Mr Reynolds. The information fits my theory exactly. I'll be seeing you shortly." He was about to hang up when he remembered he'd forgotten something. "Chief, would you be kind enough to pick up a nice old lady on your way over?"

"No problem, Jupiter."

Jupiter gave Reynolds the address of Elizabeth O'Rien.

"And give my regards to Miss Caballero."

"I'd do that."

Jupiter hung up, took a look at his watch and nodded at Mrs O'Rien encouragingly. "Chief Reynolds will pick you up. And in his company, there will be a woman whom you should take a good look at. I, for one, must leave now to make the necessary arrangements!"

During the few minutes they took to get to Rothman's house, Jupiter told Bob about his visit. But it was so completely out of context that Bob didn't say anything.

When they reached the estate, Jupe asked Bob to stop right in front of the barred sliding gate. The automatic lights came on and the security camera caught the car.

Unimpressed, Jupiter got out of the car, went to the intercom and pressed the button.

"Yes, please?" It was a man's voice.

"Jupiter Jones. I wish to speak to Mr Rothman!"

"Mr Rothman is not seeing anybody at the moment."

"He'll be interested in what I have to tell him."

"Make an appointment at his office. I really can't let you in just like that."

"Tell Mr Rothman that it's about the truth about *Gwendolyn*."

"Excuse me?"

"*Gwendolyn*. The truth about the white yacht."

"One moment, please."

Jupiter stepped from one foot to the other. For a while, nothing happened. Then finally a crackling sound could be heard in the loudspeaker. "Hello?"

"Yes. I'm still here."

"Like I said, make an appointment tomorrow. I wish you a good night! Get home safely!"

Jupiter stared at the intercom. Then he turned around furiously on his heel. With a strong jerk, he pulled open the passenger door of Bob's Beetle and let himself fall onto the seat.

"I guess you weren't exactly welcomed with open arms," Bob said with a grin. "So what happens now?"

"Please move the car back a few metres, then put it in forward gear and keep the throttle up. This stupid gate shouldn't be much of a match for a solid car like yours!"

"Does the gentleman wish to get out first, or shall I scrape you off the windscreen after I've done my job?"

"Scrape it off, but do it gently." Now Jupiter himself had to laugh at his absurd proposal. "Okay, Bob, I have no idea how we're going to get into this secured compound. But we must succeed... and we must do it before twelve midnight."

"Let's just wait for Reynolds or Cotta."

Jupiter waved him off. "They will turn Reynolds down, and Cotta too, unless he's got a warrant in his pocket... and he doesn't. Why should he? The police have no idea what this is all about... and these people know their rights, Bob. We've got to get in there and clear up the matter."

"Then there's only one thing left to do..." Bob said. "Break in!"

"Yeah, sure. But how? This thing is locked up like a prison!"

Bob laughed. "You sound just like Pete, Jupe!"

"Please don't exaggerate, Bob. But how can we realistically enter this maximum-security facility..."

"Let's get out of sight of that camera first," Bob suggested. "Otherwise, they'll think we're pitching a tent here, and they'll bring out the big guns."

He started the Beetle, turned around and drove back on the road. After a few metres, it was swallowed up by the darkness of the night. Bob spotted a little side road and he parked the car there.

"What time is it, Jupe?"

"10:10 pm."

"So just under two hours left. We stalk back to the gate on foot. Maybe some guests will come and we can sneak in unnoticed." Bob grinned, more out of desperation. "We can hope. While we're waiting, kindly explain to me what's going on here!"

Jupiter's anger was gone. Bob's suggestion sounded reasonable. "So let's go." He opened the passenger door and got out.

When they got near the gate, they had no choice but to cower behind a bush and wait. They did not dare to come any closer as they did not want the automatic light to turn on again.

“You had something else to explain to me, Jupe!” Bob said as he got into position.

“I’m freezing,” Jupiter replied.

Bob shook his head wordlessly. In the faint moonlight, the wind had picked up and was driving the clouds away. A distance behind a dark and somewhat lower mountain ridge were the lights of Los Angeles, flickering like an artificial sea of stars against the dark night sky. Bob had never seen the city so beautiful. For minutes, he sank into the sight.

“Life is so unmanageable,” he suddenly said. “Millions of people live here. There are millions of stories that just run side by side, touch each other by chance, and then go away changed.”

“But we sometimes keep things in order,” replied Jupiter calmly. “Maybe tonight we will be able to bring two more of the many stories together. That may not be much in total, but it means a lot to those involved.”

Just as Bob was about to answer, they heard a vehicle approaching. It worked its way up the same road they drove along earlier. As the vehicle came closer, they saw that it was a van. It slowed down and finally turned in front of the gate. The automatic lights came on and the car stopped. The two investigators could make out the writing on the small van—‘24-Hour Catering Service—Call Hillary Lour’. The driver left the engine running, got out and walked to the intercom. From inside the car, the bass of the radio music boomed.

Bob pulled Jupiter by his sleeve. “Now!”

With a few steps, they got out of the darkness and made the short way to the back of the van. The diesel engine chugged along. The two detectives got a good foothold on the bumper and their hands clung on to the top of the van.

At the intercom, the driver spoke to the butler. Moments later, he came back and sat down behind the wheel. He hadn’t noticed anything.

Peeking behind the back of the van, Jupiter and Bob watched the gate to Rothman’s estate slide open.

The driver waited until the opening was big enough and then he drove in. The van went past the gate and rolled along the narrow, slightly ascending path, at the end of which the two boys saw the lights of the large estate. It was right on top of the hill.

“When do we jump off?” whispered Bob.

“The bushes ahead,” Jupe whispered. “I’ll go first... Jump off and hide on the right side!”

The van was not moving very fast, so Jupe just stepped off the van and hurriedly crept behind the bushes to the right side of the van. Two seconds later, Bob followed suit.

“We have to be careful because Escovedo is around somewhere here tonight,” Jupiter whispered.

“Probably he is waiting inside with a butcher knife to serve us for dinner,” Bob remarked.

But they had no time to speculate further. The van had reached the front of the main portal which was about ten metres from the boys. A man, presumably the butler, was already waiting for the van. He waved impatiently and the driver got out.

“What took you so long?” said the butler.

“Lost my way.” The driver went around the van, opened the door and grabbed one of the tubs of food. Then he approached the butler. “I suppose the food should go to the kitchen?”

“Yes, follow me.”

As the butler and the driver entered the house, Jupiter whispered to Bob: “Now’s our chance. We gotta slip into the house now!”

Without waiting for a reply from Bob, Jupiter ran out from the bushes and straight to the main entrance. Bob had no choice but to follow behind.

But he had barely reached the house when Jupiter suddenly turned around and ran back. The reason was at the doorway—Escovedo!

With a grimace on his lips, he took out a knife and begun his pursuit of the First Investigator. At once, Bob sped back into the darkness. Jupiter followed closely behind.

But Escovedo had begun to run after them. This time he wanted to get rid of the detectives once and for all!

16. Pursued!

Jupiter and Bob escaped into the night. After they had scurried a few metres along the house wall, Bob pulled Juve behind a small hill. They laboriously suppressed their heavy breathing.

After a few seconds, they heard Escovedo running past with heavy steps. But to be on the safe side, they stayed in their hiding place. A little later, Escovedo returned cursing. Bob waited a moment.

“Now!” he whispered, and they went on stalking the house. As they turned the corner, they saw that there was a helipad on the side. Whoever resided here did not have to deal with the traffic jams on the coastal road.

“There must be another entrance here—for those that come by helicopter,” Jupiter surmised. “We’ll break in, gather more information and prepare the way for the inspector!”

They didn’t have to look far. From the helipad, a path paved with stone slabs led to a staircase going underground. At its end was a steel door.

“Now we need Pete and his lock picks,” Bob murmured softly to himself.

“Not necessarily,” replied Jupiter. “Why should all doors be locked in such a perfectly secured property? Always count on the convenience of people!”

Carefully he pushed the door handle down and braced himself against the cold steel. “You see?” The door could be opened, and they went into a dark passageway.

Jupiter pulled out his flashlight and turned it on. Now it went a little straight ahead. On the right-hand side, there was a door, but the two boys didn’t notice it at first. They reached a corner, behind which was a staircase. They followed the stairs upwards and reached another door. It too was unlocked. Jupiter opened the door a gap and peered out. A satisfied sigh escaped him. They had done it—they were right at the lobby.

Just in time, Jupiter could perceive a shadow that disappeared into the back part of the lobby which expanded into a wide dining room.

There, a man sat at a large table, facing sideways. Two half-filled glasses of red wine and two glasses of water stood before him. A woman sat opposite the man. Jupiter recognized her—Regina Pearson, the lawyer. As her gaze could easily fall in their direction, Jupiter hesitated to push the door open further. In any case, their voices were clear enough to understand.

“... What’s going on out there, Regina? Where is the food? And what is that man you brought with you doing?” It was a dark, older man’s voice speaking. Jupiter never doubted for a moment that it was Samuel Rothman, the son of the oil baron.

Mrs Pearson, the solicitor, only replied after a brief hesitation. “Dad, he’s found some teenage troublemakers and...”

“Burglars? On my property? Since the last robbery, I’ve had all the security on the fence improved! We are perfectly protected!”

“They got in anyway, Dad!”

“Should I call the police?”

“No, wait. Let’s not spoil a lovely evening. After all, today is the final transfer of ownership of Rothman Oil. This calls for a proper celebration! My new guard will handle the naughty boys. Besides, Anthony’s with him.”

“My good old butler and your guard? This must be the new dream team?” Rothman laughed briefly. “But anyway, Regina, to me, the transfer is just a formality—a date, nothing more. Why are you making such a fuss about it?”

“Maybe it is not as clear-cut as you think, Dad! Old stories can suddenly start to pop up again. A little coincidence is enough!”

“What do you mean?” Suddenly, Rothman’s voice sounded suspicious, as if he’d just been woken up from a nightmare. “Have the paintings resurfaced?”

At that moment, there was a humming sound. It was a warm, penetrating sound that Jupiter immediately identified as a tone from the intercom. Someone must have arrived at the gate. Hopefully it was Reynolds or Cotta.

“We have to think of something,” he whispered to Bob. “The lawyer will simply dismiss Cotta or Reynolds.”

Carefully he pushed the door open a bit. But at that moment, he flinched. Regina Pearson had just got up. “Anthony’s still outside, Dad. I’ll go see who it is. Don’t get up.”

With forceful steps, the lawyer hurried past. She didn’t notice the door was ajar as she had other worries now. Jupiter and Bob heard her pressing a button.

“Yes, please?”

“Inspector Cotta here. Rocky Beach Police. I’d like to pay Mr Rothman a visit. Please let me in.”

It took a moment for Mrs Pearson to get over the surprise. “He is busy at the moment. I’m sure he’ll have time for you tomorrow, Inspector.”

“It’s urgent.”

“I’m sorry. What’s this about?”

“I can’t tell you through the intercom. Please open the gate.”

“No, Inspector,” replied Mrs Pearson, and she tried to give her voice a touch of joking lightness. “Unless you have a search warrant in your pocket, I’m afraid I’ll have to put you off until the next day. You know the rights. No offence, Inspector, but this is my final word!”

With a silent curse on her lips, she turned around and went back. Jupiter and Bob, moved away from the door and ducked into the darkness of the corridor. It was already too late to close the door.

Mrs Pearson’s footsteps approached and stopped short. An open door was not unusual in itself but today, Regina Pearson was warned and she wanted to be sure. She came closer and she pulled the door open. Light fell into the corridor. Just in time, Jupiter and Bob had crept around the corner.

“Hello? Is anybody there?”

Jupiter and Bob continued to grope in the darkness. When they had come in, they had noticed a door on the side. After seconds that seemed endless, Jupiter found the handle.

“In here, Bob,” he hissed and they quickly slipped through the door.

Just in time, the lights came on in the corridor. Without making a sound, the two detectives pushed the door shut. Jupiter switched on his flashlight and for a moment, they gasped in surprise. They were in the garage.

It was a big garage. Seven old cars were parked there in three rows. All were two-seater Mercedes-Benz roadsters with removable roofs. The brightly polished paint reflected the light from Jupiter’s flashlight.

“They’re also called ‘pagodas’,” whispered Jupiter, who obviously was no stranger to anything, “and that’s because of the car’s distinctive, slightly concave hardtop reminiscent of Asian temples. In principle this applies to three different models, but my favourite is

definitely the 230SL, just like the one in the back, silver on the outside and black on the inside with a black roof. Seems like a very gifted collector, this Mr Rothman.”

“Nice lecture,” said Bob, always not surprised by Jupiter’s knowledge. “Now I know what I’m going to give you on your next birthday! But should we hide now?”

Jupiter nodded and pulled Bob to the silver car. The First Investigator still found the time to stroke his hand over the roof sloping down to the middle. Bob had already nervously opened the side door and pressed himself into the black leather. Then Jupiter followed. With the gentle click of a perfect finish, the doors fell back into the lock.

At that moment, the lights flickered in the garage. Jupiter and Bob pressed themselves into their seats and barely dared to breathe. The detectives heard the footsteps approaching and receding. Apparently, Mrs Pearson searched the spaces between the cars. After seemingly endless seconds, they were back in the dark.

The two boys gave a sigh of relief.

“So what happens now?” Bob asked with a glance at his watch. “Cotta is at the gate and Chief Reynolds would be here soon. It is 11:15 pm now.”

Still fascinated by the car, Jupiter stroked gently over the leather of the seats.

“We’ll just have to start on our own,” he said.

17. In the Lion's Den

Jupiter switched on the flashlight and they got out of the car. With a melancholy look at the car, the First Investigator pushed the car door into the lock.

Then he shone his flashlight around the garage. After a little wandering, the light cone got stuck on a shelf which was mounted on the side of the wall. All sorts of sorted junk lay around in it—book boxes, old electrical appliances, ski boots.

“Several years ago, there was a break-in here,” Jupiter said. “Chief Reynolds told me on the phone earlier. The thieves tampered with the cars and stole numerous car parts.”

“Did they catch them?”

“I don’t know. Besides the car parts, I think they took something else they found by accident.”

“The paintings?”

Jupiter nodded.

“Did Reynolds tell you that too?”

“No, on the contrary, Rothman hadn’t put the paintings on the list of stolen items.”

“But why, Jupe?”

“Because he had something to hide,” Jupe replied. “Let’s go. We need to get to Rothman and confront him with the truth. This is our only chance now.”

“Wait a minute, Jupe!” Bob exclaimed. “I just saw something interesting here.”

Bob took the flashlight off Jupiter and shone towards the shelf again. Something had caught his attention. It was a couple of photos that came out of a cardboard box that had fallen over at some point over the years.

Bob unerringly pulled out one of the photos. It showed an old billboard featuring a logo with two V’s inscribed on it—one upright and one upside-down superimposed on it!

Bob’s hand was shaking. “This symbol, Jupe! This symbol, Jupe, it’s—”

Curious, Jupiter took the photo from his friend. He held it closer and read the writing, which was just barely decipherable at the bottom of the photo—‘Venice Oil Company, Headquarters: Rocky Beach’.

“Good work, Bob! Two V’s—I suppose the upright ‘V’ stands for ‘Venice’ and the upside-down one for a derrick.” With a smile on his lips, Jupiter slipped the find into his jacket pocket. “This is the last piece of the puzzle I needed!”

Now they knew the way. They left the garage, crept down the corridor and then up the stairs that led up to the lobby. When they arrived at the door, Jupiter took a deep breath.

“Let’s go, Bob! It’s time for the great Jupiter Jones show.” He pushed the door open.

Rothman was alone at the table. He looked up in horror as he saw the two boys coming towards him. “Who are you—”

Jupiter interrupted him. “Jupiter Jones is my name, sir. I’m a detective. This is my colleague, Bob Andrews. We are solving a case that concerns you and we have some important questions.”

“How did you get in here?”

“It’s not important right now, sir...”

“I’m going to call the police if you don’t get out of here right now!”

"In fact, I have even done that for you. Inspector Cotta of the Rocky Beach Police Department is right outside your front gate now! We would be very grateful if you would perhaps hurry and let him in."

Samuel Rothman opened his mouth, but no sound came out. The answer had taken him by surprise. He pushed up the metal glasses on his nose to take a closer look at the boys. Jupiter thought that it certainly didn't often happen to a man spoiled by success, such as the son of an oil baron, to lose his composure.

He must be around seventy, Jupiter estimated. Casually dressed, but at his best. He had inherited his thick, now white-grey hair from his father, whom Jupiter had seen in the photo at Mrs O'Rien's house. It gave him an almost aristocratic aura. But if one looked closely, his face bore the features of unpleasant coldness that his daughter also possessed.

"What is it about?" he then asked in a fragile voice.

"*Gwendolyn*, sir. I want tell you and ask you to confirm the truth about *Gwendolyn*—the sunken yacht."

"You won't do anything!" A voice cut through the room like a knife.

Bob and Jupiter flinched and turned around. Mrs Pearson stood just a few steps behind them. She held a gun in her right hand.

"What are you doing, Regina?" Rothman asked in surprise. "Do you know these two boys?"

"Just let me handle this, Dad."

Jupiter cleared his throat. "It won't do you any good, Mrs Pearson," he said as calmly as he could, even if he wasn't entirely convinced of what he was saying. "It's not midnight yet and I shall reveal the truth before then."

Mrs Pearson laughed. "You will not do anything... as I'm about to throw you two out!"

"Don't you want to hear what I have to say first?" Jupiter said confidently.

"I'd love to hear you remain silent forever." She realized the contradiction in her sentence and laughed bitterly. But that didn't make up for the blatant threat she had made.

Suddenly Jupiter felt a draught. It was so fine that the others present did not notice it. Inconspicuously, Jupiter let his gaze wander outside the dining room door. The way he was positioned, he was the only person who could see a few familiar faces crossing the lobby and hiding behind the entrance to the dining room. It was the perfect setting.

"I want to know what the boy has to say," said Mr Rothman. "There's no harm in that, Regina."

"All right!" Mrs Pearson agreed reluctantly. "Speak up, fat boy!"

Jupiter hated being called that, but he forced himself to smile.

He turned to Mr Rothman and spoke loud and clear: "Your father, Jeff Rothman, the founder of the oil company, owned three yachts. *Samuel*—was named after you, the son... *Samantha*—was named after your mother... And *Gwendolyn*—was named after your grandmother. This is what Mr Rupert Horowitz told us. He was a sailor on the yachts at that time. Two of the yachts still exist, but one sank under mysterious circumstances. That was *Gwendolyn*." Jupiter took a little pause for effect.

"And then there are three paintings, one of each yacht... You had those paintings, Mr Rothman. It was a secret and the paintings weren't on display. Instead, you hid them in your garage... and that would never have changed if it hadn't been for some stupid incident..."

"... Namely, a burglary," Bob interjected. This part of the story was clear to him by now and Jupiter let him continue speaking. "The thieves originally intended to steal valuable spare parts from your car collection. But then they discovered the paintings and took them as well. Maybe they thought the paintings were worth something—for a little extra business."

“But months later, the paintings were sold cheaply to Titus Jones, the owner of The Jones Salvage Yard,” Jupiter took over again. “Titus Jones, who is my uncle, had no idea that the paintings had been stolen. Not even the police knew because you did not report the theft. The reason was simple... The paintings carried a terrible secret. I can only guess why you hadn’t destroyed the paintings the moment you bought them for a lot of money from Mr Paddy O’Rien—the painter and former sailor on *Gwendolyn*. After all, he did blackmail you with the paintings.

“In his paintings, he depicted the old story, which O’Rien knew about because he was involved in it at the time. Although he was not on the last voyage of *Gwendolyn*, but one of his colleagues was. I suspect, Mr Rothman, you were too attached to your childhood memories—namely the yachts. You reworked the paintings a bit, so you could keep them. By that, I mean that you painted over certain parts of the paintings to conceal certain information.”

Mr Rothman was silent. Suddenly he looked tired. The self-assured composure was gone. His daughter noticed it too.

“That’s enough,” she said firmly. “It’s time you two get out of here.”

“I haven’t finished yet!” Jupiter couldn’t stand it if he couldn’t shed light on all aspects of the story.

“Let the boy continue, Regina!” Rothman’s voice sounded faint. “I want to hear the whole story. At some point, I have to. I’ve carried everything around with me long enough. I only told you years ago, and now I’m wondering whether I did the right thing.”

“Dad! Please!” Mrs Pearson’s eyes were flickering.

“Keep talking, boy.”

Jupiter nodded at him. So Regina Pearson was the driving force. That much he knew now. She was all about power and possession as she was the heiress to the empire... and her father struggled with the burden that lay on his shoulders.

“Then I would like to begin by telling you what happened to the paintings,” Jupiter said. “*Samuel* was given to Chief Reynolds, the former chief of police of Rocky Beach and an old friend of ours... *Samantha* was with the said Mr Horowitz... And *Gwendolyn* was gathering dust in the storeroom of my uncle’s salvage yard for a long time until a woman by the name of Miss Anita Caballero came along and bought the painting. She took it to a book store where your daughter, Regina Pearson, happened to be there.

“Mrs Pearson, you recognized the painting immediately so you approached Miss Caballero. You suddenly realized that there was a time bomb ticking because if the paintings got into curious hands, your fortune was in danger!” Jupiter gave Mrs Pearson a scornful look.

“But I will come to that connection later... Anyway, you found out from Miss Caballero that she bought the painting at my uncle’s salvage yard. Then you engaged an old accomplice who had done dirty work for you before—a ruthless thug called Mr Escovedo, or whatever his name is. You told him to get all the three paintings back. Escovedo visited the salvage yard and stole the inventory records, where he got the names and addresses of the buyers of the paintings.

“Then he began his work, and he did it nowhere as delicately as one might have thought, sir. I can tell you that that rascal is a danger to life!”

“Go on,” urged Rothman.

Mrs Pearson looked at the clock with concern. It was 11:40 pm.

18. The Truth About Gwendolyn

Jupiter paused. Now he had everything going his way and he only needed to wrap it up.

Suddenly, Jupiter turned around and faced the dining room door. “Now, may I ask Chief Reynolds and Inspector Cotta to join us,” he called out. “Together with your company.”

“Gladly,” Chief Reynolds’s familiar voice came to them.

Mr Rothman, Mrs Pearson and Bob watched with amazed eyes as Chief Reynolds and Inspector Cotta appeared at the doorway. Two women followed behind them—Mrs O’Rien and Anita Caballero. Samuel Rothman flinched when he saw them.

But Jupiter and Bob were really amazed when they saw who else came in as well.

“Pete!” Bob exclaimed.

“Jupe! Bob! I can’t miss the great Jupiter Jones show for anything.”

“But how...” Bob began.

“Police helicopter,” Pete said and wiped the salt-coated hair from his forehead with a grin.

Jupiter then introduced the newcomers to Mr Rothman and Mrs Pearson.

Inspector Cotta explained that they seized the opportunity to enter the property when the food delivery van drove out. In front of the house, they were confronted by Escovedo. “He behaved—to put it mildly—not very decently, so I had to take him into custody,” Cotta added and he turned to Mr Rothman. “Your butler, at our insistence, was kind enough to let us into your house very discreetly.”

“So you were able to hear everything I said earlier?” Jupiter asked.

Cotta nodded. “Yes, and we are curious to see what else you have to offer us. And, lady, please hand me your gun.”

Mrs Pearson had dropped her gun and looked paler than the infamous Pacific coastal fog.

Jupiter waited until Cotta had the weapon in custody. Then he continued: “As I have already said earlier, Mr Paddy O’Rien was blackmailing you, Mr Samuel Rothman. You will ask me—with what? Well, he knew something from the time when you were a young man... and that is you are not the only child of Mr Jeff Rothman.” Jupiter took a pause again.

“Rothman Senior had another child—a daughter that was given the name of Gwendolyn, after his own mother. But the mother of this child was... his maid—and the maid was you, Mrs O’Rien!” Jupiter waited a moment for those present to digest the shocking news.

“Mrs O’Rien, you carried a deep secret that you never told your husband... but he knew,” Jupe said. “No one was allowed to know about it and you disappeared for a few years. But I suppose Mr Rothman loved his daughter.”

With tears in her eyes, Mrs O’Rien nodded. “He... he was very attached to the child,” she stammered. “Regularly... he came to the ranch... where he had put me up... It went so far that he wanted Gwendolyn to receive the largest part of his company...”

“Much to your displeasure, Mr Samuel Rothman,” Jupiter continued. “I estimated that you were 19 or 20 years old at the time and saw yourself as your father’s sole successor... So the child had to go... At this point, Mrs Pearson, could you please show us the three paintings.”

Mrs Pearson remained standing there and ignored Jupe’s request.

On noticing that, Samuel Rothman said: “Regina, go get the paintings...”

With a nasty flash in her eyes, Mrs Pearson disappeared and returned shortly after with the paintings. Jupiter took them to a low cupboard and leaned them there against the wall.

“*Samuel, Samantha and Gwendolyn*,” Jupiter read the names of the yachts.

“I can’t see anything special in the paintings,” Mrs Pearson said with a last-gasp attempt to conceal the truth.

Jupiter swayed his head. “All too often we enjoy the convenience of our own opinion without having undergone the discomfort of thinking about it!

“Mr Samuel Rothman simply painted over certain parts of the paintings. Pete gave me the solution. If you run your hand over the surface of certain parts of the paintings, you would feel the changed surface structure. But even so, I should have noticed that the kitschy swimming women do not match the style of the paintings. The question is—what is painted over?”

Jupiter threw a meaningful glance around. “Well, we don’t need to have an art restorer flown in because I found the sketches to the paintings that Paddy O’Rien had hidden in his house.”

The First Investigator pulled a rolled up folder from his jacket, put the sketches on the floor in front of him, smoothed them out and placed each of them over the corresponding paintings. Except for Mrs O’Rien, who had seen the sketches earlier, the people present stared at the sketches.

The first sketch showed the yacht named *Samuel* with a man and a child aboard. The second sketch was for *Samantha*, which was moored at an island with the man and child on the shore. The third sketch showed *Gwendolyn* commencing its return journey with the man on board and the child left behind on the island. In all the three paintings, the man and child were absent as they were painted over.

“Mr Samuel Rothman, you took your half-sister Gwendolyn to an island and dropped her off!” Jupiter explained. “Only one other sailor witnessed it. Then you faked a maritime accident, sank the yacht and returned. You told your father that his daughter had drowned when the yacht sank and his life was shattered. But the painter, Paddy O’Rien, got wind of it through the other sailor.

“We can see that O’Rien painted three different yachts, but only one was involved and that was the *Gwendolyn*. He was blackmailing you and so you bought his paintings for a horrendous sum of money of which O’Rien used to finance his house.”

Samuel Rothman cleared his throat. He looked lost and after a moment, he slowly said: “Yes... the yacht’s curse is on me. It’s a good thing that the bad old story has finally come to light. It weighed more on me every day... I am prepared to get my well-deserved punishment.”

“Couldn’t all this wait until tomorrow?” Mrs Pearson broke in.

“So that the girl will inherit nothing?” Rothman pulled a face and turned briefly to the others. “My father never came to terms with the alleged death of Gwendolyn. He wrote a clause in his will that Gwendolyn will receive most of his bequest if she reappears by the fiftieth anniversary of the accident. I do not know if such a clause is legally valid. Gwendolyn would probably get her inheritance that way—at least her share. Maybe my father was distraught at that time and had hoped that Gwendolyn would be eventually found alive. So I suppose he had set a time frame of fifty years after which there should be no more dispute in the company’s ownership. Incidentally, the anniversary is today, and the clause expires at midnight.”

Rothman stopped and looked at his daughter. "What are you afraid of, Regina? Are you afraid of losing the company shares I signed over to you and your husband? Gwendolyn is not even here. But I wish she were..."

Mrs Pearson fell silent.

Jupiter thought it was time to intervene in the conversation again. All the while he had noticed that Miss Caballero was trying her best to suppress an emotional expression.

"I still have more to reveal," Jupiter said. He approached Miss Caballero and asked her: "May I please see your pendant?"

With trembling hands, Miss Caballero took off her necklace and handed it to Jupiter.

The First Investigator held it up next to the photo that Bob had found. "I have here a pendant owned by Miss Caballero and a photo that we found in your basement car park. Both show the symbol of the Venice Oil Company, headquartered in Rocky Beach. We know that the company has since been renamed 'Rothman Oil Company'.

"When Samuel Rothman left you, Miss Caballero, on the island, he had forgotten to take this pendant off you so it remained your only clue from your past. The truth is that you are Gwendolyn—the supposedly drowned daughter of Jeff Rothman and Elizabeth O'Rien!"

Miss Caballero burst into tears and Mrs O'Rien, also in tears, stepped up to console her. There was an astonished silence among the others.

Jupiter felt how difficult it was for the people involved to deal with the situation. After all, Mr Rothman had just found his half-sister; Mrs O'Rien, her daughter; and Anita Caballero, her family; and he, Jupiter Jones, had solved an old secret and crime.

Samuel Rothman was in utter shock, and Regina Pearson fell in complete silence. After a moment for all present to digest the revelations, Jupiter decided to wrap it up by clarifying a few unanswered questions.

First he turned to Mrs O'Rien. "Perhaps you are wondering how I came to think that you had a daughter... Your stuffed bear gave me that hint. You said that it was from your own childhood but I know a bit about toys from my uncle's salvage yard. I found out from a collectors' catalogue that your stuffed bear was a toy from fifty years ago. So your information could not be correct."

Mrs O'Rien nodded absently.

Then the First Investigator turned to Miss Caballero. "The whole story started because you came across the *Gwendolyn* painting during your visit to my uncle's salvage yard. Perhaps it was a coincidence that you bought the painting, or perhaps it was more than that. A white yacht like that appeared in your earliest childhood memories. It is the ship of your dreams."

Still emotionally distraught, Miss Caballero nodded but did not say anything.

A little while later, Inspector Cotta called in his men to take Mr Rothman and Mrs Pearson to the Rocky Beach Police Department to record their statements.

After that, the rest of them gathered briefly outside Rothman's house before leaving.

"I am impressed, Jupiter," said Chief Reynolds, not without pride. "Samuel Rothman and his daughter Regina will be judged by the courts. After all, the old man regrets what he did. But strange as it may sound, I'm glad I met Anita at least this way. We had a good chat, and I'm sure that it won't be the last..."

Jupiter and Bob exchanged a look, but Reynolds was not finished. "So Anita... or Gwendolyn... Miss Caballero, you told me that you are toying with the idea of moving to Rocky Beach!"

The much-talked-about person looked around. "Yes... I think I would definitely consider that." She smiled. "But I have a lot to catch up..."

“For sure!” Chief Reynolds said. “Let me know if I can help.”
The Three Investigators smiled and grinned to each other.